

“The Relentless Love of God”

Theme: Stories that Change the World

Scripture: *Luke 15:1-7*

Things I'd like to remember from today's sermon:

Meditation Moments for Monday, May 5 – Read Ezekiel 34:1-10, Luke 15:1-2 – Ezekiel prophesied among the Israelites during their exile in Babylon, around 550 years before Christ. Through him God said Israel's leaders had failed, being self-absorbed and indifferent to what happened to their people. The religious leaders in Jesus' day seemed to have this same struggle. When Jesus reached out to sinners and outcasts, they grumbled about it, showing that they didn't care about the people who were hurting and felt far from God.

- Jesus acted as though God deeply loved all people. Did what you learned early in life about God and “church” agree more with the Pharisees who snubbed some people, or with Jesus? How comfortable are you with loving today's “tax collectors and sinners” (including yourself), both inside and outside the church?
- *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* said, “[Ezekiel's] metaphor goes beyond the normal responsibilities of making sure the sheep were protected and fed ... it focuses on ...caring for the sick and finding the lost. These would equate to the need for kings to bring about justice for alienated, disenfranchised people.” What are some of the ways you actively support and work for justice for the alienated and disenfranchised people around you?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, thank you for those who've planted the seed of your kingdom in my life. Teach me how to discern when to speak, and when to silently let your love shine through me to others. Amen*

Tuesday, May 6 – Read Luke 15:3-7 – Jesus told three stories to the Pharisees and legal experts who grumbled about him mingling with “tax collectors and sinners.” Probably echoing the image from Ezekiel 34, the first story was about a shepherd who lost one sheep from his flock. This shepherd, though, was not at all indifferent to the loss. He dropped everything, searched everywhere until he found the lost sheep—and then threw a party to celebrate finding it

- Pastor Bruce Larson wrote, “A shepherd once explained to me that sheep nibble their way into lostness. They move from one tuft of green grass to the next, sometimes right through a hole in the fence. When they're done nibbling they can't find the hole and they're lost. Some of us know what that is—to nibble ourselves bit by bit into the far country.” When have you been like the lost sheep, not sure how to find your way home? What “shepherd(s)” has God used to find you and bring you home?
- Have you ever wondered why Jesus spoke of “ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives”? We can be quite sure he was using irony to show his critics' attitude. In fact, we all need to change and grow in God's kingdom. In what areas of your life is God inviting and challenging you today to change and grow?

Prayer: O Jesus, thank you for seeking and finding me, for being “thrilled” and placing me on your shoulders! Give me eyes to see others who want to be found and drawn into your great heart of steadfast love. Amen

Wednesday, May 7 – Read Luke 15:8-10 – Each of the woman’s coins was probably worth about a day’s wages. In her dimly-lit peasant home, with a straw-covered floor, the woman searched tirelessly until she found the coin. Jesus ended this parable by saying again, “In the same way ... joy breaks out in the presence of God’s angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life.”

- Who are your “coins,” the people you value enough to go out of your way to reach out and touch? Is there family, friend or co-worker you particularly sense Jesus calling you to “seek and find”? Ask God to give you a heart that sees the world as God does, that refuses to limit love only to notable or “perfect” people.
- Think of a time when you joined in celebrating really good news for a family member or friend. What was the cause, and what was the celebration like? Have you ever been part of celebrating that someone you care about has “changed both heart and life”? What are your inner feelings if it’s someone you don’t like very much who makes such a change?

Prayer: Gracious God, you came in the person of Jesus to seek and save the lost. Come into me each day to touch lives you are still seeking. Amen

Thursday, May 8 – Read **Luke 15:11-24** – Losing a sheep or a silver coin was costly. Finding either was cause for joy. But what of a son who was “lost” through his own choice? Jesus’ story vividly pictured the naive young man rashly using up his resources. But the father kept watching, and never gave up. Then the father’s extravagant love embraced him with robe, ring, sandals and the fattened calf, saying, “This son of mine ... was lost and is found!”

- In today’s culture, we expect children to “grow up and leave home.” But scholar N. T. Wright wrote that in the culture of Jesus’ day, this was a story of shameful behavior, “with the younger son abandoning his obligation to care for his father in his old age.” Have you had times when you were like the younger son in Jesus’ story? When have you been on the receiving end of forgiveness and welcome something like what the father in the story gave the son?
- Wright also noted that “in a culture where senior figures are far too dignified to run anywhere, this man takes to his heels as soon as he sees his young son dragging himself home.” This is one of Jesus’ great pictures of what God is really like. Do you picture God high up, intimidating, looking down on you sternly? Or do you see him as a loving parent always eager to run to you and throw his arms around you?

Prayer: Lord God, sometimes I’m careless, sometimes I’m stubborn. Keep bringing me “to my senses,” making me willing to come home to you, again and again. Amen

Friday, May 9 – Read **Luke 15:25-32** – We may think Jesus’ story ended once the younger son was home, and the party began. But Jesus told the story to people who grumbled about him mixing with “tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 15:2). He added the older brother, who thought he was the “good” son, and was not at all pleased that his brother had returned. At story’s end, the father poignantly pleaded with the older brother to join the party: “We had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found” (verse 32).

- The servant in the story said, “Your brother has arrived.” When the father came out to him, the older son said, “This son of yours returned.” The father shifted the relationship back: “This brother of yours,” he said. In your imagination, argue the older brother’s case: why shouldn’t the younger one have been welcomed home? In what ways was that case, and the “good” brother’s reaction, out of harmony with the father’s wishes?
- As he did in a few other parables, Jesus left this story “unfinished.” He didn’t say what the older brother did. How was this approach effective in putting the responsibility with the Pharisees to decide how they would respond? With whatever “older brother” tendencies you find in yourself, how will you finish Jesus’ parable?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to “enter in” to the joy of your kingdom, and celebrate what you are doing in other’s lives. Move me from a “tit for tat” existence to an exuberant, abundant life. Amen.

Saturday, May 10 – Read **Ezekiel 34:11-16, John 10:7-15** - Ezekiel portrayed God as a good shepherd who would “seek out the lost, bring back the strays, bind up the wounded, and strengthen the weak.” John’s gospel completed the circle, saying that God came to earth in the person of Jesus, reached out to the lost and the strays, bound up our wounds and took special interest in the weak. He was the Good Shepherd, and in the end, he did indeed give up his life for the sheep—us.

- Think once more about the stories Jesus told—the shepherd seeking the lost sheep, the woman sweeping and searching for the lost coin, the father running to greet the lost son who had come home. In what ways can these stories deepen and enrich your understanding of how much God loves you? Had you ever pictured that, every time you move closer to God, joy breaks out in heaven—that you are that important to God? How can trusting that God loves you in this profound, relentless way give you a solid foundation for living “life to the fullest,” as Jesus promised in John 10:10?

Prayer: *God, your love seems almost (but not quite) too good to be true! Thank you for giving your life for me. I open my heart to you—transform my inner life, broaden my horizons, and shine out of me as I enter into your joy. Amen.*

Family Activity: God’s love is for all people. Consider ways your family can include others and let them know they are welcome in God’s family. You might invite a family or some friends to your home for a celebration of God’s love. Design colorful placemats, prepare a simple and fun meal and sing songs of praise to God! Maybe you would like to visit someone who is lonely or make cards for them. Name some of the gifts God has given you and plan a way to use them to share God’s love. Pray that God would help you celebrate, give thanks for and spread his love.

Stories that Changed the World

“The Relentless Love of God”

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber – Confirmation Weekend 2014
May 3-4, 2014 at First United Methodist Church, Durango

Scripture: Luke 15:1-7

*1 Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach.
2 This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!
3 So Jesus told them this story: 4 “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? 5 And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. 6 When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ 7 In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!*

VIDEO The Relentless Love of God – Sermon Starter

SLIDE The Relentless Love of God

When we first moved to Durango, some of you may remember that we had a large dog who was an Alaskan Malamute mix named Mikah. Mikah was older and he lived a few years here with us and after he passed our family decided to get another dog. My wife went to the Humane Society and she found this cute

dog that we were told was a puppy. They said he was about two months old and he was a Great Pyrenees mix. We like larger dogs and so we thought this might be a good fit for our family. Tami took the kids down to meet this dog and they immediately fell in love because he was so sweet and cute. He wasn't available for adoption yet because he'd just come into the shelter and so that next weekend we brought our other dog down to meet him to make sure that we get along. After the introduction it was clear the dogs got along well and so they told us to come down first thing on Saturday morning because that's when he would be available for adoption and they couldn't put our name on him ahead of time.

Our family was the first one at that the shelter that morning and we arrived to meet our new dog and we were all very excited. We sat down with the clerk at the front of the Humane Society to begin the adoption process and when they pulled out his file we were told that the dog already had been spoken for and had a hold on it. My kids were crushed and I asked how this was possible because we were told he wasn't even available for adoption until today and we were told we could not put a hold on him. It turned out that someone knew an employee at the Humane Society and they put a hold on him even though they were not supposed to. I don't get upset very easily anymore but let's just say your pastor got very firm in that moment as I thought about the disappointment my kids were going to experience.

The supervisor who was there that morning then came to meet with me and agreed that we had already invested in this dog and that it was appropriate for us to be able to adopt him. Joey has turned into a sweet dog and is a member of our family, but as you can see from the picture he is not a Great Pyrenees mix as he hasn't gotten any bigger since we got it and he barely weighs 40 pounds.

SLIDE Joey (Graphic)

A few years after we got Joey he began to lose weight and throw up everywhere around the house. It turns out there were several dogs in our neighborhood who had died and some believed that someone was poisoning the animals. We are not really sure what happened but basically after a series of tests and lots of messes around our house we discovered that Joey's pancreas had stopped working correctly. He now gets a special pancreatic enzyme on his food and he has to have special food otherwise it comes right back up. He tends to get sick when he gets nervous now and we probably won't be replacing any of our carpeting until after Joey goes to doggie heaven. I now spend more on Joey's healthcare than I do on the rest of our family, and there are some days I wish I

hadn't put up a fight for him back at the Humane Society!

But Joey is still part of our family and he is so darn cute and he is very snugly, maybe one of the most affectionate pets we have ever owned. One of the worst parts of Joey's condition is that it makes him hungry all the time, although if he eats too much, it's not good for him and he eats the wrong thing, it is not good for us! So whenever anyone of us opens the door we have to be careful because Joey will make a run for it and then roam around the neighborhood to find food. Most of the neighbors now know him and every once in a while you can hear one of them screaming, "Go home Joey!" And we know Joey has gotten out again.

Not long ago Joey made one of his famous runs for the door and disappeared into the night. We have bears and coyotes and even mountain lions in our neck of the woods but Joey is pretty fast so I typically don't worry about him. This particular night he was gone for a long time and I went out and called for him but he didn't come back. I waited a few more hours and then went outside again and called for him. It was about 11 o'clock at night and I was starting to get worried because even though he drives me crazy and he costs me a fortune I still love that dog. I sat down on our front steps and pretty soon I heard a jingling and then I saw his white markings in the dark night and he came running up to me and jumped right into my arms. He likes to launch himself at you and crawl upon you when you're in bed and stick his nose right your face to make sure that you know he is there. I swear he would crawl inside your clothing if you would let him.

I tell you that story because I think if Jesus were telling the parable of the lost sheep today he would be talking about cats or dogs and not sheep. In Jesus day, everybody raised sheep from the time they were kids. Today, most of us don't raise sheep but we do have pets. Which of you, if you're dog or cat ran away, wouldn't go put up "lost" signs on every street in your neighborhood and go searching from street to street? You might put it on Craigslist or a lost animal website or go to the Humane Society. You would do whatever it took to find your animal and bring them back home, wouldn't you?

Today we continue in a series of sermons on the parables of Jesus and the stories that changed the world. They illustrated for the people in Jesus' day who God is and who we are, and the spiritual condition in which we find ourselves. In this parable Jesus is trying to teach us something about ourselves and he is teaching us about the relentless love of God.

SLIDE The Relentless Love of God

I would like to invite you to take out of your bulletin your Message Notes and your Meditation Moments. If you feel God is speaking to you, I invite you to write down what you feel like God is saying on those blank lines right below the Scripture listed that we heard today. I'm counting on the fact the Holy Spirit is going to speak to you somewhere during this message and the power of the parable of Jesus will become evident for you. You will find also daily Scripture readings and questions for you to reflect on that will help you go deeper into the ideas of this parable this week. If you're watching online you can download this from our website.

Jesus told stories from everyday life and sheep herding was common for people living in the first century in Palestine. In the northern part of Galilee people had sheep, but the main thing they did was raise crops, which is why we heard the parable last week about the farmer who is sowing seeds. In the southern part of Israel it was more common to raise sheep. The same is true today and when we were in the holy land a few months ago we saw lots of sheep and lots of shepherds. I asked our tour guide when we were in the Holy Land, if he would stop at some point so I could interview a Shepherd for this sermon today because I knew I would be preaching on the parable of the lost sheep. We were driving through Samaria when our guide had the driver pull the bus over because there was a shepherding family and a bunch of sheep on the side of the road. He kind of caught me unprepared, but we dashed out to meet his family. You see a picture of their sheep here on the video screen.

SLIDE Sheep in Samaria (Graphic)

You saw a piece of that video in the introduction to this sermon, but unfortunately we had technical difficulties and the battery ran out in the middle of the interview and so you didn't get to hear the whole thing. Here's a picture of the Shepherd whose name was Mohammed.

SLIDE Jeff and Mohammed (Graphic)

Our guide was speaking to Mohammed in Arabic and explaining to him who I was and that I wanted to ask him some questions about being a Shepherd. Our guide was translating back and forth until finally Mohammed looked at me and said, "I speak English."

I discovered that Mohammed had 121 sheep and he and his family took care of them. I asked him if he would know if he was missing a sheep and he said, "Of course I do. What kind of Shepherd you think I am?"

So I asked him if a sheep was missing, would he go and look for that sheep. He told me, "No, I would send my dog."

I asked him what would happen if the dog didn't bring the sheep back. Would he go and get the sheep himself? He said to me very matter-of-factly, "No, I would get a new dog."

SLIDE Sheep eating (Graphic)

You notice that in this picture most of the sheep are eating and this is very common because this is basically what they do. They graze on this land and eat those small plants that you can see in the picture. There are shepherds and Bedouins primarily in the southern and central part of the country. Many of them live in what we would call the Judean wilderness. When Jesus places this parable in context he says, "If one of you has 100 sheep and one of them wanders away, wouldn't you leave the 99 in the wilderness and go find that one lost sheep and bring a back home?"

SLIDE Bedouin shepherd camps (Graphic – 2 Pictures)

I want you to be clear what this looks like. Above you see shepherd camps that we drove by on several occasions that are in the Judean wilderness. The wilderness looks like this picture on the video screen.

SLIDE Judean wilderness (Graphic)

This is what the area look like not far from Mohammed and near where we saw many of the shepherds and their camps. The hillsides were often covered with sheep and when they are grazing they take them all over these hills. The ravine down below would have been called in David's Psalms, "the Valley of the shadow of death." This is the wilderness of Judea and this is where sheep were grazed.

When you read in this story about one of the sheep getting lost outside in the wilderness, this is what it looked like. Then you have to decide if you will go look for the sheep or will you let it try to survive on its own in the wilderness, which probably won't happen even for a night.

SLIDE Shepherd and Sheep Near Bethlehem (Graphic)

Of course this parable is not really about sheep and shepherds but it's about God and it's about us. The truth is that we share some similarities with those sheep. One of the similarities is that sheep are social creatures. They have a herd mentality and they tend the flock together because it keeps them safe. One

of the challenges for sheep however is that while they prefer to be with the flock, and they actually like having a Shepherd, because it makes them feel safe as he leads them beside still waters and takes them to greener pastures, they also struggle with something that we struggle with as humans.

The grass is always greener on the other side of the pasture. Mohammed told me that this is how it is with a sheep. No matter how green the grass is in the area where he has the sheep, one of those sheep is always going to be right there at the edge and they will eventually wander off in search of better food which it never really finds. The sheep will wander off, not really meaning to, but always thinking that they will find better food over there in the other direction.

Many of us spend much of our lives wishing we could be someone else or somewhere else or with someone else or doing something else or living someplace else. That's the mentality of the sheep.

Here's another truth about sheep that applies to us. Mohammed told me that while sheep prefer to be in a flock, they literally will nibble their way into trouble. They don't mean to get lost, and they don't want to leave the flock, but they nibble here and they nibble there and they nibble a little bit further away and then finally, hours later, they realize they are all alone. They can't see the other sheep and they can't see the Shepherd. They begin bleating and there is no one to come and rescue them.

Many of us have slowly wandered away from God. We have nibbled our way lost, slowly and sometimes inch by inch. We finally look up from our nibbling and we ask ourselves this question, "How did I get here? How did I get so lost?"

I was meeting recently with a member of our church who had not attended for a while until Easter. They told me they had gotten sick several months ago and couldn't come to church but then they got better and they still did come to church. They told me that after a while they forgot what the voice of the Shepherd, the voice of God, sounded like. They forgot how comforting his voice was. Then one day their life became a mess and they asked himself the question, "How did I get so lost?"

I read an article this week about a schoolteacher who was arrested for inappropriate contact with the student. They were a very popular teacher but they nibble their way here and nibbled their way there, a little bit at a time down a path, and one day they woke up and realized they made a mess of things. That's what we find happens with sheep when they get lost. They don't mean to get lost

and part of this parable is about sheep that wanders away. Why did it wander away? Most of the time it just nibbles its way lost.

Mohammed shared with me that when a sheep would nibble its way lost it could be deadly. In the holy land in the time of Jesus there were five major predators: mountain lions, cheetahs and leopards which no longer exist in that area today. In Jesus' day people like the apostle Paul often equated the devil or Satan to a lion which was seeking to devour. This was a common understanding of what would happen to a sheep if you wandered away so it was a great metaphor as the apostles talked about the danger of wandering off by yourself away from God.

The two predators which were prevalent in Jesus day and are still prevalent today are the spotted hyena and the desert wolf. Our family got to see a spotted hyena up close over spring break at a park down by Flagstaff called Out of Africa. The trainer even made a hyena laugh and I thought you might like to see that.

VIDEO Hyena Laughing

SLIDE Spotted Hyena (Graphic)

SLIDE Desert Wolf (Graphic)

You can see the desert wolf in this photograph where he has a bone in his mouth and it looks like there is still flesh on it. It has devoured some sort of creature in this photograph was actually taken in the holy land. These packs of wolves and hyenas are out there waiting for sheep to nibble its way lost so it can be devoured.

I told our guide Michael that I would love to come back to the holy land some time and hike and maybe even backpack from the Sea of Galilee to Jerusalem. He told me I could do that but I would do it without him. He said he wouldn't camp out at night in the wilderness. He told me I could stay in a tent by myself if I wanted, but he was afraid of the wolves and other predators that live in the wilderness of Judea.

Jesus talked about teachers who would lead people astray from God and he called them wolves in sheep's clothing. These metaphors are meant to help us recognize the dangers that can happen when you are a sheep and you wander off by yourself. You find yourself lost and sometimes devoured. Isaiah the prophet captured the same idea and you might remember it from Handel's Messiah where he quotes Isaiah 53:6.

SLIDE ***“All we like sheep have gone astray, we have all turned to our own way.”***

Don't forget that when Jesus is telling us these parables he is telling us our story, because all of us have wandered off at some point in our lives. It may have been when we were teenagers and we pushed God away. It may have been when something tragic happened in our lives and we felt God let us down and we pushed God away. Maybe we just nibbled our way lost by losing focus and getting caught up in the worries and struggles of this world. All of us have been lost and we can still find ourselves lost in the future if we are not paying attention to the voice of the Shepherd.

It's important to remember the context of this parable. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus tells this parable in a totally different context. It might be helpful for you to know that Jesus preached the same thing and told the same parables over and over again in different contexts. You find them in different places in the Gospels and sometimes it's because the gospel writers are meaning to tell you something different and so they place it in a different context, but in the case of this particular parable it's likely that Jesus told it more than once. You might have figured out that I tell you the same stories over and over again. Every once in a while one of you will tell me that you heard me tell a certain story several years ago and mostly I will be glad to know that you were just listening. When I preach and other places I use some of the same stories to illustrate other points and that's how Jesus preached and taught.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus is teaching about the importance of caring for children when he tells this parable of the lost sheep. In Matthew 18 Jesus has a child stand in front of the disciples and he says:

SLIDE ***2 Jesus called a little child to him and put the child among them. 3 Then he said, “I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven. 4 So anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.***

Then he says something very important, especially when we recognize that in my profession there have been some very hurt children in the church.

SLIDE ***5 “And anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf is welcoming me. 6 But if you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin, it would be better for you to have a large***

millstone tied around your neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea."

It would be better to tie a millstone around your neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea than to have to stand before God after hurting a child. That's a pretty powerful image and it's why one of our church's core values is that we invest in future generations by putting children and youth is utmost importance. This last week our church council approved remodeling our Fellowship Hall, adding a Mezzanine and adding a second floor above the youth office and storage area for added use space because we are having as many as 90 even on Tuesday nights and lead a place for them because it is actually illegal for them to be in the youth room!

It's after this section of Scripture in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus tells the story of the lost sheep who wanders away and how the shepherds leave the 99 to go find the one lost sheep and bring them back home. He then refers to that lost sheep as one of these little ones, referencing the child he has standing before him. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus is talking about children and doing whatever it takes to Minister to our younger generations and help them stay connected to God.

In Luke's gospel the context however is completely different. Jesus has been ministering to sinners and tax collectors. They are drawn to him and Jesus understands himself to be a Shepherd who is reaching out to these lost sheep. The religious leaders who are in my profession as well as those who are deeply committed to God in the first century are watching this and they begin to get upset because Jesus is spending so much time with prostitutes and sinners and tax collectors. We read that in the opening line of Luke 15.

SLIDE ***1 Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. 2 This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!***

The Greek word for "associating with" is actually to "befriend." Remember that the religious people had this idea that what God wanted was to be pure and holy. They believed God wanted them to distance themselves as much as possible from sin which meant not associating with sinful people. Jesus is not distancing himself from sin however. He's actually eating with sinners and becoming a friend to those who were seen as unclean. As a response to their grumbling, Jesus looks at them and he tells them this parable.

SLIDE ***4 "If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? 5 And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. 6 When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.' 7 In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!"***

This is a rhetorical question, wouldn't you rejoice? For the religious leaders, the answer was, "No, if that sheep wanders off, it gets what it deserves. I have 99 sheep over here and I'm going to cut my losses. I'm not going to go out where the wolves are at the end of the day and search high and low, in the Valley of the shadow of death, to find that one lost sheep who was stupid and nibbled his way away."

That is likely the answer that would've been given by the religious leaders and we know this because it is how they live their lives and what Jesus talked about on a regular basis. They looked at people who had nibbled their way lost and they didn't care. They didn't focus on trying to reach out to them or befriend them or welcome them back home. They focused on making sure the 99 were comfortable. It was all about the 99 and not the lost sheep and for Jesus it was just the opposite. It was all about the lost sheep.

I want to be clear that Jesus cared about the 99, but he was really interested in trying to find that one lost sheep and bring it back home. Throughout the Bible we find that God is the chief shepherd and Jesus came to embody God as Shepherd. Throughout the Scriptures however, God also called human beings to shepherd one another. Parents are to shepherd their children. Religious leaders are to shepherd those who aren't religious yet. We find ways to reach out to those who have wandered away or who just feel lost and broken and we seek to care for them and draw them back to God. The word "pastor" is actually the word shepherd. This was the role of the religious leaders, to draw people back to the Good Shepherd. But the religious leaders in this story who were surrounding Jesus had forgotten their role.

This is a constant problem for religious leaders. 560 years before Jesus, Ezekiel says this in chapter 34 about shepherds:

SLIDE ***2b What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead***

of your flocks. Shouldn't shepherds feed their sheep? 3 You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. 4 You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty. 5 So my sheep have been scattered without a shepherd, and they are easy prey for any wild animal. 6 They have wandered through all the mountains and all the hills, across the face of the earth, yet no one has gone to search for them.

The religious leaders had failed to care for the sick and bind up the wounded, to bring back the strays or to search for the lost. One of our driving passions if we are truly to be Jesus Christ to the world is to seek out those who are lost and to love them back to God. This is meant to be part of our mission as we seek to be the presence of Jesus Christ in the world. This is what drove who Jesus was and he came to strengthen the weak, bind up the injured and search for the strays and bring them back home. This is part of what should drive us as people of faith and if it's not, then we need to remember and we need to care.

This is why we ask those of you who are committed members of this church to park farther away and leave the closer spaces for guests who might be lost sheep trying to find their way home. A number of you chose to come to worship on Saturday night Easter weekend instead of on Sunday morning at 930 when you normally come to worship. Several of you told me that you wanted to make sure there were enough seats for people and so you and your family chose to come in at a different time. We still ran out of room at 930, and maybe next year will try to find another way to make more space for the those who were trying to find their way home on Easter weekend can do that. Jesus tells us this story to remind us as Shepherds that we are to care about those who have nibbled away from God.

SLIDE Judean Wilderness Sunset (Graphic)

We have talked about the sheep and we've talked about the wolves and so now let's look at the shepherd who is the chief shepherd, which is God. I want to remind you again of what that wilderness looks like where the shepherd has to go to find that one lost sheep. It's becoming dark and there are mountain lions and hyenas and desert wolves lurking. Jesus tells us that the kind of God we serve goes into these places, searching relentlessly for us. Even when we wander away,

God is still searching and calling out our names in the dark. He is calling out to us to return and come back home. Jesus takes up this same metaphor in John's gospel, chapter 10 where he says these words.

SLIDE ***14 "I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, 15 just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd.***

I learned this last week that sheep are actually pretty smart animals, even though we say they're dumb. As mammals go they are just below pigs and about equal to cows in terms of IQ which is relatively high as mammals go. Sheep can actually be trained to know their names and so if you are a shepherd training a sheep it will respond to its name when you call it. Sheep also learn to know the shepherd's voice and it won't come to the call of someone else. It will come when it recognizes its shepherd's voice. Sheep also can recognize facial expressions and recognize when their shepherd is happy and when their Shepherd is sad by looking at their shepherd's face. This is why Jesus said, "My sheep know my voice and I called them by name and they come to me."

SLIDE **Sheep on shoulders (Graphic)**

I love the picture that Jesus gives us at the end of this parable. You've seen pictures like this one of Shepherd with a sheep around their necks. Jesus says that when he finds one of the sheep this is what he does. Shepherds actually bind the feet of the sheep together around their neck and the sheep then relaxes on the shepherd's shoulders. There is this picture of God seeking after us and when he finally finds us he takes us in his arms and put those on the shoulders so we are safe once more. He carries us when we can't carry ourselves. This is why Jesus says that the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

This is a profound and staggering idea, but the shepherd is willing to face the lions and the wolves in order to save his own sheep. When Jesus came to be the good shepherd for us, he lays down his life. From the cross, he shows us how he takes the anger and hatred of the wolves and lions and says, "This is how much I love you. Come back little lambs. Come back." He lays down his life for his sheep.

This parable is about the relentless love of God who is willing to lay down his life to bring the flock to safety. Jesus doesn't tell us to "earn it" as he's hanging on the cross. He just says, "Remember me – remember how much your shepherd

loves you and live differently in response."

One last image from this parable is that the lost sheep is really the one who gets into trouble. Maybe you were that lost sheep in your family who rebelled. Maybe with the prodigal child who left home, and remember that the story of the prodigal son is simply a retelling of the story several verses later in the same chapter of Luke's gospel. What's interesting is that Jesus came looking for the sheep who didn't fit in and who wandered off and he saw them as treasured and valuable and loveable. No matter how unfortunate their lives were, no matter how messed up things became in their lives, he looked at these people with love and said, "You are my friends."

Maryann Bird was born with multiple birth defects. She had a cleft palate. She was deaf in one ear. She had a disfigured face and lopsided feet. As she was growing up she said the worst thing in life wasn't all of the disabilities, but the worst thing was the torment that she got at school from the other children. She was teased and mocked. The worst day of the entire year for her was the day they gave hearing tests to all the children. When I was a kid they did these tests individually, but Marianne lived in a time when they did it for the whole class all at once. The teacher would ask every pupil to come and stand in front of the class and they would whisper something in their ears and the child would repeat what they heard.

Marianne recalled that every year, when the teacher would whisper something in her ear, she couldn't understand or make out what the teacher said but she was forced to recite whatever she thought she heard. She would recite the words that she thought she heard and all the other children would giggle and laugh at her, the girl whose face was disfigured and couldn't understand plain English.

Finally, she was in a class with one of the best teachers in all of the school and her name was Ms. Leonard. She said that Ms. Leonard called all of the children forward to do the hearing test and when it was her turn she was terrified. She was waiting for the ridicule that would happen once again like it had every other year. Usually teachers would whisper in her year things like, "The sky is blue," and you have to repeat that. They might say something like, "You have new shoes," and you would repeat that phrase.

Marianne said that she came forward and Ms. Leonard leaned into her good year to whisper something to her. She didn't whisper, "You have new shoes," or, "The sky is blue." These are the words that Marianne wrote about that

experience.

I waited for those words but the words which she spoke were the words that God must have put in her mouth and on her heart for the seven words she whispered in my ear that day changed my life. She whispered, "I wish you were my little girl."

When I heard those words, someone who actually wanted me and loved me, it changed everything.

The shepherd is whispering. He is calling your name and he is saying, "I wish you were my little girl. I wish you were my little boy. You are my little lamb. Come home. Come home."

I want to end by inviting you join me in reciting the words that King David wrote as a Shepherd boy when he reflected on the relationship he had with God. They start off as a concession of faith and then they turn into a prayer midway through. We read these words at funerals because they bring us comfort and peace. Say this out loud with me as we remember the words to the 23rd Psalm.

SLIDE ***(King James Version) The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.***

Let's pray...

SLIDE **Prayer**

The Good Shepherd is calling your name. He's saying, "Come home a little lamb, come home." I would invite you in your own words to simply say something like this,

Be my shepherd oh God, and I will be one of your lambs.

Help me to know your voice and follow where you lead.

I love you oh God, thank you for loving me.

Recognizing that we are not only sheep but we are called to be shepherds, to reach out to the lost and bind up the broken and strengthen the weak, would you simply say something like this.

Lord, use me and help me to see the people around me as you see them. Help me to bring back the strays and search for the lost.

Oh God, as the senior pastor of this congregation I thank you for the great privilege of being there earthly shepherd. I pray thee would help us as a congregation never to forget that we are called to care for the lost sheep and the weak and the wounded and the damaged and the broken and see them as you see them. Lord, we thank you that you are our shepherd and we are your lambs. In your holy name we pray. Amen.