

In the name of the God who always calls us back when we're lost. Amen.

One thing is always true about Jesus' parables: they can be read on many different levels so that several different messages can come from the same story. Eight times in the Gospels, Jesus tells His audience something like, "Let those with ears hear." That's the way the parables are. The message we get from them will depend – in part – on how we are listening.

On the surface, the most obvious reading of the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin tell us that "the least of these" is very important to God. Therefore *we* should care about them as well. And there are other interpretations as well. But what about this one? If we wander away – or otherwise get lost – God will always be right there, looking for us, trying to get us back to the flock, or back with the other coins, *where we belong* – where we will get what we need and where we will do the most good.

This is Rally Day, a day that some parishes refer to as "Homecoming Sunday." It is the Sunday when all those who have been scattered around other hillsides for the summer come back together and celebrate being one flock.

When I was growing up, if any of the grandchildren asked, "Why do we have to go to church?" my grandmother would reply, "Because God said so!" That was sufficient reason for her and, by golly it was supposed to be for us as well. All of you Biblical

scholars out there are probably scratching your heads and saying, “I don’t know of any place in Scripture where it specifically says that we should go to church every Sunday.” And you would be right. After all, when the vast majority of the Bible was written, there wasn’t anything that looked like what we think of as church today. But ... there are some New Testament passages and these parables (and others like them) to support my grandmother’s view.

Jesus told His audiences that God constantly pursues a relationship with *all* people, including the very least and the very worst. He said that when we have wasted our lives and our fortunes, we can come home and Our Father will rejoice at our return, lavishing us with love and forgiveness. In other words, no matter how lost we are, God will always call us home and shower us with grace when we return. He told them that when – like sheep – we nibble our way away from the flock; when we unintentionally get away from all the other sheep, simply by wandering off and getting out of the habit of being with the flock; if we look up we will notice the Shepherd right there beside us, trying to lead us back into the fold.

There is an old story about a long-time, faithful church member who uncharacteristically missed several Sundays in a row. The pastor went by his house to check on him. The man let the pastor in and they both sat down in front of a roaring fire in the living room of his cabin. Neither one spoke. After a while, the pastor picked up the fireplace tongs and took a hot coal from the fire. He set it on the hearth, apart from

the fire. Soon, the coal stopped burning and began to cool down. After a while longer, it was just a lump of charred wood. Then the pastor picked it up and put it back in the fire. Again it roared to life, burning brightly. The man looked up and said, “Pastor, thank you for the sermon. I’ll be in church next Sunday.”

I don’t know if that story is true or not. But I know that it says something very true and very important about our lives as Christians. We can only fully be what we are meant to be if we are in community with other Christians. We cannot possibly burn as brightly – or as intensely – as we should, unless we draw heat and oxygen from each other. I would submit to you that that is one of the reasons that the Good Shepherd is always looking for us when we wander off. He knows that we can never fully realize our potential unless we are part of a community that also seeks to have a deep relationship with God.

There is not a priest in the Church who has not heard someone say, “I am a very spiritual person, but I don’t need to go to church. I feel very close to God when I (fill in the blank: am on the golf course; am fishing; am in a deer stand; sit on my back deck with a cup of coffee and admire the view).” Those folks may be right ... but frankly I doubt it. I played golf for quite a while and without exception, everyone I ever heard refer to God on the golf course did so in the context of a shanked shot or a missed putt. And frankly the wording didn’t seem very spiritual. And I have never, ever heard of anyone receiving absolution from a fish on a hook or from a freshly gutted deer. Some

people may indeed feel very attuned to God's creation while looking out at nature from their back porch, but I would submit to you that the same view can be had at times other than the hour of services in church.

The Good Shepherd is constantly trying to bring us back when we are lost, not only because we are all beloved of God (although that, in itself would be plenty of reason) but also because the Shepherd knows that we get safety, security and nourishment from the flock that we cannot get anywhere else.

Last week I talked to you about the demands of Discipleship and about how important it was for us to look at our schedules (our calendars) as reflections of our commitment to being Disciples, to being a part of this sheepfold. This morning's parables are the "why" behind last week's "what." The time that we give back to God, in the form of common prayer, shared study and community ministry is a way of reflecting back to God that we are happy to be part of this loved and blessed flock. Giving back the "first fruits," the best ten percent of our time and talent to the work of the Church, is an acknowledgement that we can only burn brightly and with intensity if we are a part of larger fire.

Eight years ago this month, Time Magazine ran a story about former president George H.W. Bush's trip to Japan to revisit the place where the bomber he piloted had been shot out from under him and his crew during World War II. The elder Bush went to Chichi-jima, a small island next to Iwo Jima. It was anti-aircraft fire from this tiny island

that had struck his plane as he approached on a bomb run designed to knock out a Japanese radio relay station. After Mr. Bush had been spent some time on Iwo Jima and in a small dinghy, bobbing up and down in the same water where he had been rescued nearly sixty years before, he visited with the people of Chichi-jima. One man on the island had served in the Japanese Imperial Army and said that he had actually watched as a young naval aviator was plucked from a life raft by the crew of a US Navy submarine. He told Mr. Bush that one of his friends had remarked, “Surely America will win this war, if they care so much for the life of a single pilot.” And although I am sure that there was grief over the two crew members who lost their lives in the crash, there was undoubtedly great celebration in that submarine for the one who had been lost but suddenly was found.

This week I read something written by a pastor named Richard Donovan. He said,

The Church is made up of people who acknowledge their need for God. When a person realizes that they need God and asks to join His kingdom it is as if that person has been found. When that happens, the Bible tells us that, ‘there is joy in the presence of the angels of God ....’

That is something that Jesus was trying to get across in these parables. We are *all* beloved members of this flock. If we wander away, God notices and misses us. And God always sends the Good Shepherd out to bring us back – even if we are bleating and complaining all the way back – not only because God loves us, but because God knows that *this* is where we *need* to be.

Welcome home. Join the flock as we celebrate and feast together at God's Holy Table. And then search your hearts ... listen for God's voice ... as you decide what YOU can do to give the best ten percent of your time BACK to the God who gave it to you. Amen.