

Title: The Good Shepherd Seeks and Saves

Subtitle: God welcomes us with compassion and understanding

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/emTj6tYozXY>

All over Scripture, we read of God seeking his wayward children. In the creation story in the garden of Eden, God is depicted as one who searches for Adam and his wife, Eve, when ***“they hid from the Lord among the trees of the garden. So the Lord called to them, ‘Where are you?’”***¹

In a similar manner, our Lord in the Gospel today is seeking those who were lost by not only welcoming them but also eating with them.² When the Pharisees and teachers of the Law saw this, they grumbled. But, due to an implicit sense of self-righteousness, their heavy complaining demanded a response. So Jesus told them three parables. Two of them were read today, and the third, the parable of the Prodigal Son, will be covered on another Sunday.

These parables teach us that God is on a mission. In our New Testament lesson today, Paul clarifies that mission when he wrote, ***“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—(then he adds) of whom I am the worst.”***³ Then he admitted that he was a persecutor of the Church and a man of violence. But he received mercy because he acted in ignorance and unbelief—all the while believing with great enthusiasm that he was doing the will of God. The Pharisees and Scribes in our Gospel today were no different. They had “a zeal for God but not according to a

¹ Genesis 3:8-9

² Luke 15:2

³ 1 Timothy 1:15

knowledge of the Gospel, for they attempted to earn a right relationship with God based on their works.”⁴

For others of us, our lostness might manifest itself in many different ways, such as compulsive, unwanted behaviors, addiction to work, or neurotic perfectionism. The list could go on and on. Therefore, even as God called to Adam and Eve, His Spirit is still speaking today and asking us the same question: “*Where are you?*” and “*Where might you be hiding?*” But the more profound question we should consider is whether we have ears to hear His call and let God find us.

The tax collectors and sinners in our Gospel today were open to this call as they “*pressed in and drew near to Jesus to hear the word of God.*”⁵ They were hungry for what he had to say, as he directly responded to his opponents, who misunderstood and criticized his intentions.

He begins with a parable about a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to seek the one that is lost,⁶ which he follows by telling about a woman who combs through her entire house in search of a lost coin.⁷ These word pictures relate to us on many levels. We have all lost valuable items such as car keys, tools, or that one thing needed to complete a project. But the meaning goes deeper, for the things that are lost have great significance.

As I ponder the implications of these parables, I remember with great fondness the number of hours of playing hide-and-seek as a child. And still today, my grandchildren love the play the game and even invite me to join in with them. The favorite part of the game for them and me is the joy of being found.

⁴ Romans 10:2 interpretive paraphrase

⁵ Luke 15:1

⁶ Luke 15:4-7

⁷ Luke 15:8-10

Since Adam and Eve's fall, getting lost has been a common human experience. And often, it doesn't seem as harmful as it might first appear.

Years ago, when I was in Yosemite National Forest, I thought getting off the prepared nature trail looked like fun. After all, I love to explore and go places that nobody has ever gone before, and in doing so, I could see and experience things that few would ever see. But as time went on, the sun started to go down. As I reflect on the experience, I can honestly admit that getting lost is fun until it gets dark. That is when things began to get scary. Then, with a growing sense of panic, I began to run, hoping to find the trail back to safe lodging as quickly as possible. But, when I stopped to catch my breath and get my bearing, I suddenly noticed, to my horror, that I was surrounded by coiled rattlesnakes ready to strike. So, after quietly calling out to God for help, I tiptoed away, vowing that if I would make it out alive, I would never again be so foolish. But, unfortunately, those who know me best would probably not vouch that such a vow was ever kept.

We, like sheep, are often tempted to think that the grass always greener on the other side of the fence. Unfortunately, living without boundaries does not lead to the freedom we crave. The forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden appeared to be "good for food and pleasing to the eye and desirable for making one wise." But ever since Eve took and ate of it, humankind has been in a sorry mess.⁸ Now, we not only have a fascination with such things, but we also have an inward bent towards them, regardless of the deadly consequences.

Thankfully, our Lord understands this human tendency. And he is always out on the highways and byways looking for us.

⁸ Genesis 3:6

The problem that the Pharisees and Scribes had was that they had no clue that they were ever lost. They were so confident in their own rightness they couldn't listen to a word Jesus had to say. Therefore, the irony in this account is that the bad people in the story are closer to the kingdom than the supposed good people because they are less in denial about their sin. For this reason, Jesus told the chief priests and elders of the people, "***The tax collectors and prostitutes get into the kingdom of God before you.***"⁹ Yet even in their spiritual blindness and hardness of heart, Jesus was still seeking and searching for them.

Gloria Gather wrote about this spiritual blindness in one of her hymns. The words go: "Right from the beginning, God's love has reached, and from the start, humans have refused to understand. But love went on reaching, offering itself.

- Love offered the eternal ...we wanted the immediate.
- Love offered deep joy ...we wanted thrills.
- Love offered freedom ...we wanted a license to live as we please. ...
- Love offered peace ...we wanted approval for our wars.

Even yet, love went on reaching. And still today, after two thousand years, patiently, lovingly, Christ is reaching out to us. Right through the chaos of our world, through the confusion of our minds, He is reaching—longing to share with us his very own life and divine nature so that we might have life and life more abundant.

May God's love that surpasses human understanding reach out to wherever we are and bring us back into the embrace of his everlasting arms. *Amen.*

⁹ Matthew 21:31