

## **“The Lost Sheep”**

Rev. Dr. Laura Miller-Purrenhage

Rally Sunday, September 15, 2019

When I mentioned to my friend, Laura, that we would study the parable of the lost sheep this Sunday, she told me a story. This summer, she and her family were on a trip to Scotland and they came across a field of sheep. Her sons really wanted to hang out with the sheep, so they got out of the car and tried to coax the sheep to come over to them. As Laura watched her sons try in vain to get those sheep to come to them, Laura remembered hearing that sheep will follow anyone if they move fast enough. So, she calmly went and stood in the middle of the sheep and then started running away from them. Sure enough, the sheep followed.

“Sheep are followers,” she said. “But maybe the lost sheep wasn’t a follower; maybe it was a free spirit, and maybe it wasn’t really lost, but just out on its own. Maybe that’s what you should preach about.”

In today’s scripture, we find that the Pharisees and scribes are grumbling that Jesus even welcomes and loves sinners. When they say “sinners,” they mean that these people don’t obey the laws of scripture as they see it, and they have probably been marginalized or outcast by their community because of it.

As I have been pondering Laura’s words, I have thought about the way that society tends to label free spirits and those who are different from them as sinners. Children who like to move around in the classroom and those with great imaginations are sometimes labeled as troublemakers. People on the spectrum, those with ADHD and other non-traditional ways of learning and being can also be labeled as difficult. Whether we use the word “sinner” or not to describe them, when we label them in this way, we can give them the impression that there’s something wrong with them. And I would ask you, what is the difference, in our minds, really, between sinning and doing something wrong?

We also know that individuals who are considered different by a dominant group are negatively labeled. The LGBTQIA+ populations are often ostracized by school, secular, and church communities alike. Our society marginalizes the homeless, immigrants, people of color, people of opposing political parties...the list goes on and on.

But Jesus refuses to leave these people out. He refuses to let them wander, feeling alone in their fields,

[a lamb in the congregation interrupts, saying “BAAAAAA!”]

and, instead, stops what he is doing

[BAAAAA!”]

Do you all hear that? I think we might have a lost sheep here in this church, right now!  
[Baaaing continues]

Children, can you please come forward again? I wonder if you could help me find that lost sheep? I'm sorry everyone, but this is really important. I'll get back to my sermon in a minute.

[Children search and find the sheep. I take it and bring it up the lectern with me.]

Thank you, everyone! Whenever we find that someone is lost and looking for help or is out alone and being left out, it's important to stop what we're doing and go to them. We can always get back to what we were doing later. This is what Jesus teaches us through this parable. All individuals, no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey, need to be welcomed, affirmed, loved and, if they want, included.

But I want to add one more thing before I wrap up. In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus suggests that the "sinners" he finds and brings back to the flock repent. His message is a good one for folks who need to repent—people who have committed a crime or hurt others, for example. It's important to know that God seeks out, welcomes and loves even these people, not letting them stay alone in the fields.

But I don't want to imply that all of the free spirits who are labeled as sinners by our society or those who are labeled as "different" need to repent. You do not need to repent for who you are.

In fact, the Greek word that we've translated as "repent" in this passage literally means "to think differently" or "to see things differently." Read this way, we can see this parable in a different light, one where the role of the shepherd becomes even more important. The welcoming, inclusive love of the shepherd can cause a change of thinking in the sheep, helping the sheep to see themselves and our entire society a little differently. That affirmation helps the sheep stop seeing themselves as "a problem," or as "different" or as "a sinner," and can encourage them to see themselves as beloved for exactly who they are.

So, my dear ones, it's okay to be a free spirit or to fully embrace and live into your identities. It's okay to be the sheep that hangs out in the field while all the others are running after the shepherd. But if you start to feel lonely there or if you feel that others are labeling you, disliking you, or even hating you, know that God and this church loves you for who you are and will always come out into that field to find you and bring you home. Thanks be to God.