

September 15, 2019

The Rev. Dr. Morar Murray-Hayes



Reading: Luke 15:1-10

The Message: Sheep, Coins and Microwave Plates

I was looking for a message today that would be short and light, a fitting companion to the celebration of our first chicken bbq together. Though I and the staff have done a lot of forward planning of worship for the year this summer, I was stuck.

Then at staff meeting this week, I shared my challenge, and somehow, we were talking about the addition of a microwave to my office. I said, it was one of the many things my daughter brought back from university when she moved home and I'd stored it in the garage.

My spouse cleaned the garage this summer, and I thought, why not bring it to work? We could heat food or reheat coffee without breaking into meetings.

One problem. Knowing it would get knocked about when I put it in the garage, I took out the glass plate and put it somewhere safe. And it continues to be safe ... from me. And I am in the slow process of cleaning the house until I find it.

In our meeting, Leanne suggested that this fit the scripture we were discussing, and a sermon was born.

Luke is an interesting story teller. He often pairs parables -- one for the men of the time and another for women. And so we have the lost sheep and the lost coin.

Both are about God. God is the one who takes risks -- God is the shepherd who leaves 99 sheep alone to go search for one.

Leaving 99 sheep alone.

My first encounter with sheep was when a fellow student asked Alan and me if we would look after their farm, their animals and two children for several weeks while they went home to Holland. We were so young we didn't know what we didn't know so we said yes.

The sheep we looked after didn't come with border collies, just the 7 and 10 year old children whom we came to call Surely and Goodness. You know, "Surely and goodness will follow me all the days of my life."

Before they left, the parents had promised their kids a dollar for every birth they witnessed. I didn't mention it was lambing season, did I?

I was writing my Masters' thesis, which I did with one eye on the window that looked out over the fields. Every time a sheep disappeared, I'd round up the troops and off we would run to find that sheep, usually off in the woods giving birth. We learned the hard way not to leave the gates open when we returned to find the rest of the sheep trampling the vegetable garden. My husband's most frequent utterance that month was "stupid sheep!" as the four of us tried to deal with this unruly flock.

Now you might ask, what were our friends thinking, leaving two totally inexperienced city folk to cope with, among other animals and two precious children, a flock of sheep? Well, when they left, there were only 6 sheep in the flock. We did manage to increase that number to 11 through lambing season. I know you were expecting we had hundreds. But believe me, 6 is as much trouble as hundreds.

I know how risky it would have been to leave 99 sheep on their own -- the dangers from outside attack were matched by the poor decision making skills from within.

But, Jesus is telling us, God takes the risk. Any one of us is worth the risk.

God is the Shepherd.

And God is the woman who loses a coin, worth a lot. And so she cleans and tidies, and searches her house for that lost coin. There's a wrinkle to this story, though. God the house cleaner, once she has found the coin, throws a party that costs her more than the value of the coin! God celebrates when one of us is found, and the celebration seems much greater than the value we would place on ourselves.

How does this concept of the lost being found by God play out in our contemporary life?

I started my doctorate at Princeton in 2000, so September of 2001 found me in New York City, two weeks after 9/11. Joining the throngs making the sad journey around Ground Zero, people were silent.

But in the rest of the city, people talked to each other. Eyes met while crossing the street. People expressed concern for one another. People asked, "Are you lost?" even before we took out a map.

They were learning a sad lesson in mass suffering. We need to be found. We need to be sought by another. In scripture we discover a God who understands that need.

You may be aware of the revolutionary change going on in TTC policy. No longer will they keep silent about incidents of suicide in the subway system. They are training station staff to be vigilant in seeking out people in distress and to intervene. Even more important, I think, they are asking commuters to look at one another, to talk to one another, to *engage*. Folk who have survived suicidal thoughts have done so because a stranger talked to them, showed concern for them even briefly.

An American gunman came to Montreal a few years ago to wreak havoc, but was stopped by a dog that touched his hand.

Through my relationship with God the Shepherd seeking the lost sheep and God the woman searching for the lost coin, my heart opens up. I am once again overwhelmed with wonder that *Jesus understands* us so well, astonished that this first century man had the wisdom to see how we demonstrate God's love by revealing it to one another: *I want to listen to you, to your story, to your pain, I'm with you in your weakness.*

And perhaps Jesus is cautioning us to get over the need to do great things ... and find instead the opportunity for small interventions.

I feel blessed to have these two parables in my life. When I feel lost, these simple stories whisper God's words to me,

"You are precious to me. Whether you can do things for me or not, you are precious to me."

I pray that you will know that hear God's whisper when you feel lost, and that others will hear God's whisper through you. I pray that you will feel God's joy and with God, celebrate life!