

Proper 19 C 2016

Exodus 32:7-14

Psalm 51:1-11

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

It was, you might say,
The summer of the sheep.

First, there were the lean, spare sheep
Of the Holy Land,
Herded together with goats
On the dry, rocky,
Lean, spare hillsides,
Grazing on what they could find,
Sheltering in the shade of the olive and acacia,
Or, of course,
Blocking the road in a bleating,
Huddled, slow moving mass.

Then,
There were the fat, wooly sheep
Standing contently
In the impossibly green pastures
Of the north of England.
unmoved, most of them,
By the walkers wet to the knees
who swished from stile to stile
Through grass drenched with dew or rain.

We saw countless sheep this summer.

So many sheep –
Yes, and the goats with them –
So many sheep living under a watchful eye.

And, once in a while,
The evidence of a sheep
That had been lost,
And not found in time –
Not found, that is,
By the shepherd.
Found by a wolf,
Or fox, or vulture.

Lost, and not found in time.

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep,
Does not go in search of the one who goes missing?
Even if it means leaving the ninety nine
To fend for themselves,
At least for a little while.

The one lost sheep is so precious
That the shepherd will risk everything
To bring that one foundling home.

When you hear these words of Jesus,
What happens in your heart and mind?

It is striking to me,
As I listen to my own heart,
And take my share in conversations,
It is striking how quickly we turn
To anxiety and concern
For the ninety nine sheep
Who are left behind.

And it is striking to me
That we rush to take it literally.
How quickly we forget
What kind of storyteller Jesus is.
Remember,
He is an attention grabber,
A master puzzler.

Which one of us would leave ninety nine in danger,
To go after the one?
Probably not many of us.
We would calculate the risk,
Weigh the odds,
And mourn the loss
Of the one,
But recognize the prudence
Of guarding the ninety nine who remain.
It only makes sense.

And – it's not only rational.
It's an emotional response.
It makes us feel safer.
Because, after all,

We are among the ninety nine.
Most of us,
When we hear this story,
Start to worry right away about the ninety nine,
Because that is our place in the story.
That is our place in the world.
We don't like to think about being left behind
While our shepherd goes off
After a foolish lost sheep.
What if something happened to one of us?

But God is not like that.
Jesus asks us,
If we are brave enough,
And open enough,
And have enough love,
To discover something about God
If we can let this story enter our hearts.

God does not assess risk as we do.
God does not weigh pro's and con's as we do.
God simply gives, and spends,
And lavishes abundant welcome and forgiveness
And inclusion and delight
On every living thing:
Sheep and goats and foxes and vultures,
Those of us who gather here
And those who stay away,
Those who have plenty and to spare,
And those who can fit everything
Into a second hand backpack.

Is this good news?
Yes.

Is there more news?
News that is good,
But perhaps harder to hear?
Yes.

God loves everything and everyone.
And – all the evidence in scripture,
And in the stories of the people of God,
All the evidence is that God
Loves all of us more than we can imagine,
But not in the same way.

God is a looker for lost sheep.
God is a finder.
God is a chooser,
And does not hesitate
to choose searching for the lost
over the reasonable option
of guarding what remains.

Jesus invites us to confront
the startling and sometimes scary mercy of God,
and to align our values and our choices
with the care and concerns of God,
as they are revealed in scripture and sacrament
and the stories of God's people.

God cares about the material concerns of our lives.
It matters to God
That our bodies' needs for food, clothing, and shelter
Be satisfied,
Along with our souls' needs for dignity and community.

God shows us these concerns
In the law, the prophets,
And the gospels.
And, over and over,
Scripture reveals the obligation,
The sacred trust, given to those whose needs are already met.
God calls us to put the wellbeing of those who have nothing –
The poor, the vulnerable, the oppressed –
God calls us to put these people
At the center of our concern.

This truth is the heart
Of the liberation theologies
That came into being
Fifty years ago and more.

When the first of these liberation theologies –
Forms of God-talk that have transformed the way some of us think
about life and faith –
Shook the pillars of the church
And offered fresh hope to those on the margins,
The phrase,
A preferential option for the poor,
Became a clarion call for some

And a threat for others.

The law, the prophets,
The gospel,
The whole witness of scripture tells us
That God favors those the world rejects,
Forgets,
Scorns,
Throws away.

God frees slaves and brings exiles home.
God chooses to be born in a barn
And to give the good news first to the outcast
And the outsider.

God chooses the poor,
The dispossessed,
Those on the margins.
And God invites us to make the same choice.

God invites us to embrace
The preferential option for the poor.
That means putting the least among us
At the center of our concern.
Asking,
At every moment of choice,
What will this mean
For the least among us?
And who is missing here?

What will we do to for those who have no place at the table?

When we have asked these questions,
New actions have led us to nearer to God's vision for us.

We learned this lesson here,
In this church,
When we welcomed children into the center of our lives.
And that welcome brought us joy.

We learned again
When we welcomed homeless women
To sleep in our undercroft.
And that welcome brought us joy,
And helped us let go of fear.

Let go our fear
That we will lose if others have enough.
Because it is a false fear.
There is enough for everyone.
There is room for everyone.

God does not love the least among us
More than God loves us.
There is enough mercy and adoration
To go around,
Plenty and to spare.

This good news can set us free.
Free to act courageously in a troubled time.
Free to affirm and join the chorus
Proclaiming loud and clear that black lives matter.
We don't need to add that all lives matter,
Or be afraid our white lives matter less.
That's a false fear.

Choosing
God's preferential option for the poor,
God's option for the vulnerable,
For those crushed and broken
By our ongoing systemic racism,
That preferential option
Does not eliminate us.
It simply asks us to side with God
In bringing God's justice into the world
By putting those on the margins
At the center of our concern.

Here in this church, right now
We are discerning whether we are called
To build tiny houses in our parking lot.

I do not know what we,
As a community will choose,
Once we have listened to each other,
To the neighbors who live in the buildings around us,
To the neighbors who sleep behind our bushes.

But as I hear this gospel,
This morning,
I know that we are called to ask these questions.
It is not whether God is calling us

To act on the preferential option for the poor,
Whether God is calling us
to reach out in radical love.
The only question is how.

Not everyone would leave a big herd of sheep
To go look for one.
After all, it makes little sense.
But it does make love real in the world,
As real as finding a lost animal,
Picking it up,
And bringing it safely home.

Which one of you,
Asks Jesus,
Which one of you
Would fail to do that?