

Good morning everyone.

I'm honored to be able to share what I can with this church, and I thank you for all being here today and sharing this moment with me.

Today's gospel text is a parable most people are more or less familiar with. It's the parable of the lost sheep and coin. Most of us have probably heard this story more than once, and we might already feel at times like we completely understand it.

It's fairly cut and dry right? Jesus is telling us God likes it when bad people become good people. God is happy when sinners repent of their evil ways. What's the good news? Stop being bad and God will be happy. There. Done. ok I can go sit down now right? Or maybe not? Maybe there's a little more complexity here than we first realize. So let's chew on this story a little while and see what we can detect.

So, Jesus is preaching and teaching as he usually does, when some of the religious leaders and scholars around him began to discredit his teachings because of the people he chooses to associate with.

Perhaps this is something you experienced in your own life? I think many times we are told by others to watch out for unhealthy relationships... "don't hang out with this person, this person is a bad influence, don't risk getting caught up with the wrong crowd"

In the time of the Bible many people thought that God would punish or reward people for their actions by putting them into certain social classes. Oftentimes tax collectors, sex workers, even lepers and epileptics were seen as social pariahs, people not to be associated with. Their thought process was: "God has punished these people for their sin by putting hardship in their life. These people are sinful, and if I get involved, I risk getting caught up in their sin too."

Jesus chooses to address this idea with a parable. He compares God and humanity to a shepherd and a flock of sheep. This parable takes us a slightly different direction than some other shepherd metaphors. Jesus describes a very common problem when caring for sheep. The region in which many shepherds of that time lived was a hilly one, not much different than our own Texas Hill country. With that, it was very easy for a single sheep to break line of sight with the shepherd and lose its way.

When a shepherd loses a sheep, they would have to face a tough decision. If one has 100 sheep and loses one, should you leave the 99 in search for the one? Perhaps it would be more logical, and less risky, to stay among the 99 and hope that the single sheep might eventually find its way back?

What would a Good Shepherd do? What's the right choice, what's their highest moral ideal? What is the Shepherd's highest, most important value? What will happen to the 99 sheep if they are left alone? What kind of risk or uncertainty comes with leaving them to search for the lost?

The Shepherd makes a choice here that some might find illogical. The Shepherd leaves the 99, to search for the lost. Why go after the one? Why pursue the smallest scale problem when the vast majority is seemingly fine? Isn't there an inherent risk in going after this one wayward sheep? What will happen to the 99 while you are away on your search? Don't you care what happens to them? Where are you going Shepherd? Why are you doing this?

When I'm brought into the reality and practicality of the shepherd's choice, I'm always brought to a place of fear here. I feel the resounding influence of every life lesson I've been taught about scarcity and risk. There is logic in outweighing the needs of the few for the sake of the needs of the many. Our world teaches us to assess the value of our expended energy, and to ask ourselves, 'is this even worth my time?' 'What would I have to gain from this?' 'What could I lose if I take on this risk?'

Every time I am brought to the resounding logic and solid reasons why to just abandon the lost sheep, my mind can't help but remember the image of a crocheted blanket.

While weaving and stitching might seem like a strangely off-topic tangent to what I was just talking about, I promise it's all gonna make sense soon.

I can't help but be fascinated by how every stitch of a crocheted blanket is made up of a singular concept, warp and woof. Whether you knit, sew, or crochet, each thread is tied to the next, holding each other up, both lengthwise and crosswise, in a pattern called warp and woof. Each tapestry, blanket, or even our clothes is made up of a vast multitude of these simple threads in relationship with each other, holding each other up, holding on to their shape. As the simple concept of warp and woof is repeated again and again, the structure comes into shape as your blankets or bedsheets.

In the same way, when those tiny, singular relationships are broken down one by one, the structure collapses, and the fabric becomes undone. Just as the structure of a blanket is built with the simple repetition of warp and woof, the blanket becomes undone when those small links and relationships breakdown. If it breaks down enough times, it's no longer a blanket. It's a collection of broken parts, almost as if it decayed and died. Not only is its structure broken down physically, but its very identity has changed. When the weaving is undone, you no longer have a blanket. It has decayed into a form of complete destruction and the death of its previous identity.

What happens when we stop that decay? What about when that part of the blanket or clothing is repaired? Well then the structure is maintained, and that blanket or piece of clothing could last for a long time.

The structure was falling apart, but because one small choice was made to repair that damage, the structure is made whole again. Its identity is maintained, and the pattern continues.

In the same way, when the shepherd leaves the flock to find the missing sheep, it's like repairing that stitching. To go out and find the one sheep, to attend to the small detail, is the intentional reparation of the fundamental structure of the flock. The shepherd and the sheep form a bond, a relationship, and the sheep have a relationship to each other. It's a simple bond between them, but it exists, and it's very real. All the sheep in the flock, and their shepherd form an interconnected network of warp and woof with each other, a pattern work of relationship and ultimately of their collective destiny, identity, and shared purpose.

If we were to look at these sheep as not one of many, but of a network of vital pieces, then there's not much to question in the shepherds desire to keep the integrity of the flock. The shepherd's standards are simply too high to allow any of the sheep to remain lost.

In life, at times being part of a flock, whether it's a social community, a workspace, a church, or even a global community, can feel like family. Being part of a group can help you find advice and support and help you find yourself in relationship to others.

But perhaps even more relatable and understandable is the feeling of being outcast or alone. We know what it is like to feel isolated and afraid. To carry heavy burden alone and feel unable to share it with anyone. To be anxious and unsure of where you fit in. To be without direction or validation or comfort or purpose. We all know what it's like to be truly lost.

Being lost is a lot like our relationship with sin and death. When we are lost, we separate ourselves from our community. We separate ourselves from God as much as we can. Ultimately, we separate ourselves from who we truly are, and who we can be. We can become so lost that we separate from our core fundamental structure. Too much of that, and it destroys us inside and out. In those moments it's so easy to say to yourself, "no one cares" "I am just one individual." We can despair and feel like there is no hope for redemption.

But there is such wonderfully good news in this gospel today for all of us lost sheep.

The good news is that our Shepherd does not measure us as a collection, but as a network of vitally crucial interconnected relationships. The shepherd does not question the logic, or evaluate the risk of seeking out 1 in 100, 200, 1,000, 1,000,000, or even 7 billion. The shepherd sees the damage, seeks out the lost, and is fully prepared and willing to take on the risk and hard work of repairing that bond and relationship.

Thankfully God is not in the business of letting things slide, of forsaking the few for the many, or letting small things go for the sake of larger aims. God is in the practice of building and creating, one day, one creature, one relationship, and one life at a time. God is in the practice of healing, repairing, making broken things whole, bringing life out of death. God is in the multifaceted, endlessly complicated, but ultimately simple practice of grace.

In our Preschool chapel classes, we have one question we ask the kids that seems rather simple, but I actually find quite profound. We ask “Is God’s love small or really big?” The seemingly obvious answer is to raise your arms out wide and say “really big!” You might be surprised that many preschoolers often respond with “small!” I think there’s a lot of truth to that.

Often times we tell our small children, “no, you can’t do that, you’re too small, too young, not big enough” that in the mind of a preschooler, I think it becomes a comfort to know that God’s love is also small. God’s love can fit in even the tiniest of places, in fleeting moments, and in the smallest of details. Yes, God created everything from the Grand Canyon, the Pacific Ocean, the Galaxy, the universe. But God also created the flower, the insect, every grain of sand, every cell, every nucleus at the center of every atom.

All of it speaks to the same patterns of creation, the same patterns of redemption, the same patterns of life emerging from death. God is constantly in the act of rescue, revival, renewal, redemption, and resurrection. God does not evaluate whether or not the lost are worthy of grace, God simply gives us grace, over and over again. This is his standard operating procedure. Like a southern grandmother, God’s actions say “this is how things are done around here.”

After the Shepherd returns with the sheep, possibly weary from a long journey of hard work, there is no time wasted berating the lost sheep. There is no sigh of exasperation or shouting “where were you?” There is no time spent criticizing failure, assessing risk, being in fear of scarcity.

Instead the Shepherd celebrates. The shepherd brings together the community into that celebration. “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” The shepherd lifts up this sheep onto their shoulders and rejoices. The shepherd affirms their own identity in this act of seeking out the lost. The Shepherd solidifies this standard with their successful search, and then declares it in rejoicing. Each act, from beginning to end, is the same grace-filled pattern repeated in warp and woof. The pattern says “This is who I am” “This is my nature” “this is who we are”

That precedent is not typical of our world. This is not the way our society is built. This decision to search for the lost isn’t based on what’s easy, or expedient, or less scary. The decision to search for the lost is intentional, risky, and hard.

So, where are they? Where are the lost sheep? How do we weave this pattern into our own life? What grand act of rescue can we dedicate ourselves to in order to be like this shepherd?

Perhaps we can take a bit of wisdom from our Jewish brethren. In Jewish philosophy, there is a concept known as Tikkun Olam, or “repairing the world”. The way I like to visualize it in my mind is to imagine the world as a giant mirror that has been shattered into a billion pieces. While the problem’s scale might seem overwhelming, we have access to about 7 pieces of that broken mirror. And while perhaps we cannot repair the world alone, if we manage the small pieces of brokenness that are within our reach, perhaps we can begin a pattern of healing throughout the whole world.

In those decisions, in that search for lost sheep, we reinforce our identity. We align ourselves with our highest moral ideal. We affirm our purpose, we make our lives more full of meaning. We fulfill our role in the great pattern and great structure of God’s kingdom. We start searching for lost sheep ourselves.

When we see the lost sheep are found, we know that we can be lost, and found, just the same. We can live lives not so much focused on the fear of what is going to happen to us. We can rejoice in knowing that God is calling us for a great and noble purpose, built with a million small acts of grace, and kindness and decency.

Even if we aren't lost all the time, we know that the Shepherd will never stop searching for us.

And that is very good news.

In conclusion, I'd like to share a Franciscan prayer that I came across that reminded me very much of this parable.

“May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and turn their pain to joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

Amen.”