

The parable of the lost sheep

How many times have you heard this parable? Fifty? One hundred? And almost always from within the safety of 'the congregation' - sitting in the family pew, surrounded by the sights and sounds of religious comfort. So it is almost certain that we hear this iconic 'Jesus-story' as part of the flock - the 'ninety-nine.'

Surrounded by those with similar stories - with experience of having learned about God's love, and having met Jesus in the Sacraments, we are safe in our cluster of confidence.

From this position, the parable becomes a touching example of how much God loves us - and we know this because, well, were here - together - collectively loved.

This achingly familiar parable can become a tool of Christian privilege - suggesting that there are more of 'us' - the safely saved - than there are of 'them' - the lonely lost.

Now, it is perfectly natural - and altogether acceptable - to find yourself in the 'ninety-nine.' It's not wrong to want to be safe, secure and loved by God; but I wonder if I might convince you that there is a problem with that perspective...because we have each been 'the one' at some point in our lives, and it is the one after all who is the focus of the parable.

I have had (recently) troubling on-line conversations about the application of this parable. In light of those who dismiss the 'Black Lives Matter' movement by saying 'all lives matter' (and certainly they do), a conversation brought this parable into play. The writer suggested that it would be bad form for the ninety-nine to complain that 'all sheep matter' when the shepherd abandoned them to search for the single lost member of the flock. And because the person making this argument applied the parable (and designated as 'the one') members of the LGBTQI community, they met some interesting resistance.

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The act of interpreting this parable and applying it to a twenty-first century social question led to one individual accusing the original author of heresy. It was a nasty moment, and I've had my share of ugly comment wars on line.

The point the objector tried to make is that you're not allowed to make Scripture mean 'whatever you want.' The argument I would offer - especially where parables are concerned - is that Jesus wasn't talking about sheep. And he showed more concern (in this parable) for those outside the flock than those who were warm, safe and dry in the barn.

I am the one. You are the one. The lost and lonely - the tired and scared - the grieving and hopeless one. When you hear this parable, if you are not reminded that you have been that one - or perhaps feel right now like the world has turned its back on you - if you cannot appreciate the wonderful sense of grace that comes when someone searches for you and finds you and accompanies you on the long walk back to inclusion - then I'd suggest you read it again...but only after you do a quick inventory of the infinite variety of suffering and pain that exists in the world. You will see an endless group of individuals, nations, and religious communities who are - for one reason or another, on the outside of what some other person, group, nation or religion has declared to be 'the safe place' or 'the promised land' or 'the path to righteousness.'

You are 'the one.' Your personal journey from privilege to pain and back again give you a perspective on this story (if you let it) that might help you reach out to someone whose personal experience with power and authority has left them hopeless.

You are the one. You know the joy of being found - you understand what it is like to want to be included - you understand that the smug certainty of the 'ninety-nine' is fleeting and nothing more than false hope.

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It is good to be comfortable, but is it indescribable joy to have been lost and then rescued - found by someone to whom you are the most important person on a planet full of important people.

Yes, all sheep matter. But in God's eyes, you matter most. Don't ever forget it. Amen