

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Luke 16:1-13

The boss of a big company needed to call one of his employees about an urgent problem with one of the main computers. He dialed the employee's home telephone number and was greeted with a child's whispered, "Hello?"

Feeling put out at the inconvenience of having to talk to a youngster, the boss asked, "Is your Daddy home?" "Yes," whispered the small voice.

"May I talk with him?" the man asked. To the surprise of the boss, the small voice whispered, "No."

Wanting to talk with an adult, the boss asked, "Is your Mommy there?"

"Yes," came the answer.

"May I talk with her?" Again, the small voice whispered, "No."

Knowing that it was not likely that a young child would be left home alone, the boss decided he would just leave a message with the person who should be there watching over the child. "Is there anyone there besides you?" the boss asked the child.

"Yes," whispered the child, "a policeman."

Wondering what a cop would be doing at his employee's home, the boss asked, "May I speak with the policeman?"

"No, he is busy," whispered the child.

"Busy doing what?" asked the boss.

"Talking to Daddy and Mommy and the Fireman," came the whispered answer.

Growing concerned and even worried as he heard what sounded like a helicopter through the earpiece on the phone, the boss asked, "What is that noise?"

"A hello-copper," answered the whispering voice.

"What is going on there?" asked the boss, now alarmed.

In an awed whispering voice, the child answered, "The search team just landed the hello-copper!"

Alarmed, concerned and more than just a little frustrated, the boss asked, "Why are they there?"

Still whispering, the young voice replied (along with a muffled giggle), "They are looking for me!"

This morning's gospel reading includes two parables that are familiar to most Christians. Both of the parables appeal to our senses—reminding us of God's mercy, God's deep love for everyone, God's passion for drawing people into a relationship with him. The imagery of the Good Shepherd, leaving the flock to find that one lost sheep, pulls at our heart strings for our need to be wanted and protected, to be saved from enemies preying on us.

The text opens by telling us that Jesus was hanging out with tax collectors and sinners, even sitting to eat with them. There was another group present at this gathering; the Pharisees and the scribes. They were grumbling and complaining about the company Jesus was keeping at the time. The religious leaders were always careful to adhere to the Old Testament law of staying "clean, which meant avoiding sinners like those gathered around Jesus. In fact, they went well beyond the law, creating their own additional laws of avoidance and ritual washing.

William Barclay writes in his commentary, "The Pharisees gave to people who did not keep the law a general classification. They called them *the People of the Land*; and there was a complete barrier between the Pharisees and the People of the Land. To marry a daughter to

one of them was like exposing her bound and helpless to a lion. The Pharisaic regulations laid it down, 'When a man is one of the People of the Land, entrust no money to him, take no testimony from him, trust him with no secret, do not appoint him guardian of an orphan, do not make him charitable funds, do not accompany him on a journey.'"

Pharisees were forbidden to have People of the Land as guests in his home, at his table. He was not permitted to have any business dealings with them. The Pharisees were to avoid all contact with the People of the Land because they did not observe the petty details of the law.

Imagine then their shock and disappointment with Jesus when he surrounds himself with these sinners, not just once, as we discover in the scriptures, but many times.

Thinking about the behavior of the Pharisees always hits a personal nerve with me because of the way most of my dad's family treated him. Because he joined his family's Amish church, and then decided to leave, he was shunned. I guess one could say he was treated as one of the People of the Land. He was not permitted to eat a meal at the same table as his family. He was not permitted to hand a plate of food to his own mother. He was not permitted to drive family members to places where they may have wanted to go. He was blamed for the fact that his decision disqualified my grandfather from ever becoming a bishop in the church. There were other painful protocols that Dad had to follow. Oh, he could visit the family and attend family functions, but he wasn't welcome—he was made to feel like an outsider.

I came to figure out eventually, that the reasoning for these rules was threefold: 1) to protect others from the temptation to leave the church; 2) to use him as an example to others for the painful consequences of deciding to leave; 3) and to hopefully change Dad's mind so that he would return to the fold. This is what Peter Bergner, a social theologian calls, "The Sacred Canopy," which he wrote about in his book by the same name. To a certain degree, he wrote that all churches have a sacred canopy. And while our motivations for having sacred canopies may be well intended, they may shut people out or push them away.

While we probably most often reflect on this text, focusing primarily on a sheep who gets lost and is found, I found myself surprisingly directed another way this time as I studied various commentaries in preparation for writing this sermon.

Let me read to you what I read that guided me to this other direction. I read this in a *Homiletics Online* article. "***The coin and the sheep are missing. Keep in mind that the coin at one time was in the purse, and the sheep was in the fold. Then — they weren't. What happened?***" That was the initial hook that captured my attention.

Let me read a little more for you. "Mistakes were made. Procedures and protocols were not followed. So now, a search ensues for the coin and the sheep, and ***both are eventually recovered. Great! But this still does not address the problem: How was it that the coin and the sheep went missing in the first place? The church's mission certainly involves recovering those who are missing and have lost their way. But the church must also provide a place of safety for those within its fold.***

These thought-provoking remarks use these parables as examples of how parables many times address more than one issue. These two parables make a case that the lost can be found, and they are even sought after by the Good Shepherd. They also challenge us to do our part to bring the lost to the church. And yet, here we find more. The issue of the lost sheep and lost coin is even more complicated. The parables ask us to think about why they were lost in the first place.

Do some people come to church and find that the doors are closed to them? Do some find that they're not welcome and are driven from the church feeling unwanted? Does the church

adequately address the needs of all of its participants? This parable challenges the church to reevaluate how it's taking care of its coins and sheep, whether long-time members or participants—or new people, perhaps, trying to find their place in the church.

It's probably a good time to revisit our reasons for going to church. We have all said that we can worship God anywhere because God is everywhere. Some use this reasoning or excuse for not attending church. While this is true, we also have a need to be a part of community. The church is community and family, in fact. It's not just any community—we're a community of believers, seeking the way of Jesus, and following the Jesus way.

Our project is building the Kingdom of God, along with Jesus, peacefully, simply, and together. Even more, God made us for each other, not driven by increasing the number of people on our roles; but to love, care, and encourage one another. We do more than study and learn these ways of Jesus, we live them. That's the living community of the church.

Most of us would admit that we were taught to go to church on Sunday for worship. The Bible has been interpreted to say that we are commanded to go to church every Sunday where we should worship God. The reality is that it does not say in the Bible that we need to go to church on Sunday. Yes, it says we are to worship our One true God with all our being and heart. The Bible also commands us to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

"But honoring the Sabbath is something larger than keeping attendance at a public worship service. It is the devotion of a whole day every week to God and the life of the spirit. It includes lifestyle changes for that day and special family practices designed to remind one of one's covenant with God. But the gospels document Jesus as one who sometimes broke the Sabbath rules—doing such things as healing people on that day. As he put it, 'The sabbath was made for humankind—not humankind for the sabbath'" (Mark 2:27). Keeping Sabbath, in other words, is a way of living.

While there are no scriptures that specifically tell us to go to church on Sunday, there are plenty of examples in the Bible that encourage us to do so. The scriptures tell us that Jesus and the Apostle Paul did indeed go to the synagogue on sabbath days. There they met with others to worship God. We can read in Acts about the early church meeting for worship. So, yes, there are examples of what we call, "going to church" on the sabbath.

We read the writer of Hebrews 10:24-25 said, "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another." This may be the closest scripture that directs us to coming together regularly for church.

The parable of the lost sheep tells us, leaving us no doubts, that the Shepherd wants us, every one of us, to be a part of his flock, the flock which is the church. AND, Jesus' parable directly addresses the Pharisees and the scribes, AND the church today to not only seek and welcome the lost and the sinners, but also, to nurture, care for, and love them, all the while, watching over each and everyone in the church with love so none get lost—so the church is not the reason for sheep to get lost in the first place. We are to rejoice when the lost is found, and we are to rejoice that we have one another. Let us care for the lost whom we find at our doorsteps just as Jesus cares for us, bringing them into the community with open arms. And let us care for one another always just as Jesus cares for us to always remain as the flock of the Good Shepherd, never anyone finding a reason to walk away and get lost. Amen.