

PENTECOST: SHARING NEW LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 12, 2010

Exodus 32:7-14

Psalm 51:1-10

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

Don't Let Jesus Manage Your Money!

Very often in the Gospels, when there is conflict, Jesus' teaching, his story telling, his actions, are directed at helping people see things differently, to model or lead them to another way.

Reading the parables found in the Gospel lesson from Luke 15 we have to be frank. Leaving ninety-nine sheep unguarded to search for one lost sheep is terrible stewardship. The smart move is to protect your – or your master's – major investment.

“Won't you leave the ninety-nine in the field...?” (Luke 15:4, *CEV*). Some people misunderstand the passage to believe that the shepherd assures the safety of the ninety-nine before searching for the lost one. Not so. The Greek word *eremos* means a wilderness. The ninety-nine are left in a desolate, not a protected, place.

Ninety-nine sheep will soon enough make more sheep. Common sense tells us that risking those ninety-nine is not good business and is just plain irresponsible. Most people probably wouldn't leave the ninety-nine unprotected to search out the lost one.

What's a sheep worth anyway? Before you risk the ninety-nine, you'd better know what the one is worth. The Scriptures indicate that animals have a value. Matthew and Luke may disagree on the value of a sparrow, but not that there is a price for them in the market (cf. Matt 10:29, Luke 12:6). Apparently the value of a sparrow may fluctuate, according to time and place, buyer and seller.

I was thinking about this recently, when I heard a news report which sought to investigate the “non-human cost” of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. If you ask people how much they'd pay to prevent a pelican's death, for example, you would get a range of responses all over the map. Since it costs, on average, \$500 to clean an oil-covered pelican, one would deduce that a pelican must be worth more than \$500. A dead pelican, contaminated with oil, is worth less than nothing – you have to pay to dispose of it with other chemical waste. What's a pelican worth? (See Robert Smith, “Pricing The Non-Human Cost Of BP Spill,” National Public Radio, Morning Edition, July 30, 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128865947>.)

In today's Scripture, Jesus tells this story to tax collectors and sinners, precisely when the Pharisees and Scribes, economists of righteousness, are questioning the value, the worth of those to whom Jesus teaches. They are troubled that Jesus spends time with people who do not meet their standards. They understand the story enough to note that the lost sheep refers to the undervalued among them—those whom the Pharisees and Scribes deem unrighteous and, therefore, unworthy of Jesus' attention. Jesus speaks openly of their value, and this offends the Pharisees.

What's a lost sheep worth? Nothing, if you've already given up on it; everything, if you care for that sheep - or for his master.

Leaving the ninety-nine is terrible economics if you're looking to protect your investment, but life-giving if you are among the lost. You may not want Jesus to manage your money – but the good news is, you can trust him with your life.

This week's Reflection was prepared by Paul Bellan-Boyer. To learn more about his work, visit his blog at citycalledheaven.blogspot.com.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Malaysia – with thanks to God for their 25th anniversary celebration; and with prayers for the plans to promote their work in this special year, including youth projects, fundraising and World Cup-related Scriptures; and for the continued shipment of Scripture in order to carry out their mission; **Singapore** – with thanks to God for the newly redeveloped Bible House; and with prayers for smooth transition and the ability to raise enough funds to cover building cost, especially in this economic downturn, for God's blessing on the publishing projects: an English-Chinese (Pinyin) Bible and a Bible for prisoners that they will be useful tools to help people engage with God's Word, and for the work in Brunei; **Cambodia** – with thanks to God for the team in Cambodia who have soldiered on without an Executive Secretary for the last two years; and with prayers that God will raise the right leadership to guide the work, for continued blessing on the mobile distribution unit, which has been taking Scriptures to rural people over the past three years, and for the daily Bible radio program, *Fifteen Minutes For Life*.

Activity Corner: "The Lost Sheep"

Supplies Needed: Bible, white paper, pens/pencils, crayons, markers, glue, cotton.

Read Matthew 18:12-14 to compare his account of this story. Discuss how this can be used to witness to friends and family who do not know the LORD. Share ideas on why it was important for Jesus to tell this story in the presence of the Pharisees and Scribes. Invite younger children to draw and color a sheep on white paper and cover the drawing with glue. Paste pieces of cotton onto the drawing to represent the sheep's wool. Conclude by reading Psalm 51:1-10, as a closing prayer.