

Luke 15 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Grace and Peace to you friends, let's pray...

Let me tell you a story...Jesus said to a group of grumpy and anxious church leaders...there were 100 sheep. One went missing. The shepherd didn't notice at first- apparently neither did the other sheep.... but obviously once the shepherd did notice. They went immediately out to find the lost sheep. They searched high and low. Around every bush and rocky cliff edge. And once the sheep was found-the shepherd took it her arms and cradled it over her shoulders until it was safely back among in its flock and threw a party to celebrate the homecoming!

Let me tell you a story... a phrase often said by Jesus when he was trying to redirect his flock of followers...This morning we continue our sermon series-Didn't see it coming-inspired by the book with the same title by Pastor Carey Nieuwhof. This week we're focusing on the real challenge of disconnection and loneliness through the lens of the parable of the lost sheep. My guess is this parable is very familiar to many of you. It's of course, one of the three "lost things" parables found in Luke 15...a parable, of course is a typical rhetorical storytelling technique by Jesus...he tells a story using every day familiar thing to the people of the time- and parable of course ends with an underlining lesson...often a punch in the gut by Jesus...

One of the ways we encourage engaging with parables is by imagining who you personally are in it? Which character do you resonate with? Who do we need to listen to? And specifically, this morning what might this story tell us about disconnection and loneliness from each of main characters in the parable? so join me for a bit this morning in that work....

Let's start with the lone sheep character-have you been there? Lost, lonely, vulnerable and/or alone? Disconnected from your people. Lost and alone in the wilderness on your feelings and situation.

This lone sheep was there it seems whether they knew it or not ...strangely we don't know really anything about this sheep. Was he popular? Was she the bravest of them all? Was it the naughtiest or most annoying sheep? We don't know why he wandered off? Did she dream of a greener grass to eat far away? Did it get bullied in the flock? Did its sheep spouse pass away?

Did he run as fast as his four legs could carry him away from the flock? Or was it a more unintentional slow wandering that got him lost? Did she choose to leave or was she forced out by some? Did he realize how vulnerable he was? Was she scared? Sad? Or did he play tough and cool on the outside but inside had all sorts of stirring feelings?

Being a lone sheep is dangerous and vulnerable-

turns out so is being a lonely human. Let's start with some statistics, shall we?

In 2019, before the world was plagued with the COVID19 virus there was another epidemic plaguing our country. It was found as dangerous for one's physical health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and more dangerous than being obese. The epidemic is called loneliness.

A large study of 20,000 adults in the US -50% reported feeling isolated and lonely. The millennial generation up until a year or so ago was called the loneliness generation in history- however, the Z generation-the current teenagers and young -young adults among us have now surpassed the millennials and now is reported as the loneliest generation ever.

In the past decade, the number of adults living alone has grown to 25 % and 28% in older adults. Wellness experts report this epidemic is affecting American's physical and mental health in pretty alarming ways. Turns out-Isolated and disconnected people live shorter lives and are more at risk for basically every major health concern and this doesn't touch on what it does to one's spiritual and mental health. And all this was before the world was forced to stay at home due to a pandemic.

When you're alone. Away from your flock. You're more vulnerable.

Now, let me get vulnerable for a moment. As a single adult who lives alone (and one who is social and likes to be busy and engaged in a variety of communities and totally adores the amazing village I get to live life with...) this spring, early on in the stay at home orders...I began to feel slightly more anxious than my normal. I began to feel more exhausted by conversations that normally would be engaging to me. I knew I was sharing in the grief of the world as we weathered a pandemic, but it wasn't until a close friend named what I was feeling for me as loneliness could I actually admit that was what I was feeling. Strangely-she was at home with 3 kids and a husband-turns out she was feeling lonely too.

The feeling of disconnection and loneliness can show up in all sorts of ways? You can feel terribly alone in a room full of people. You can feel alone spiritually or alone in a marriage or alone in the task of parenting or aging or even dying? You can feel alone in your leadership or in your suffering.

Most of us we don't like to admit -that we might be feeling lonely. It's a word that often carries a lot of negative connotations. I have thankfully settled into this new normal we're in, found new routines and ways to connect and have moved through that feeling -but loneliness is a thing, right? It's hard.

Feeling lonely at times is natural and ok-but we really cannot afford to stay there in that pasture long without working through it. So, if you are feeling too much like the sheep alone -

know you're not alone. Reach out to someone-talk about it, seek professional help if needed. Scripture reminds us over and over again-we are not alone. It's ok to feel lonely-but you are not alone.

Characters 2: the other rest of the flock. Might perhaps you imagine yourself in the midst of the 99?

Biblical scholar, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine from Vanderbilt Divinity, points out something interesting about all three of the "lost parables" and she does so with a question-Who Counts?

I find this take on the parables fascinating and challenging. Who is counting? Why didn't the other 99 sheep notice the one sheep was gone? Where was the lone sheep's' people? Why did they let her wander off?

Now y'all-I realize sheep might not function socially this way-but come with me down this path for a moment...

What were the other 99 sheep doing while this one wandered away? We could easily blame all sorts of reasons-the sheep were too busy with work. They were all stuck on their iPhones and Instagram pages and didn't notice or maybe they were so wrapped up in their own problems they missed it- there could be several valid reasons why they missed this one sheep wandering off. But.

Pastor Carey points out in his book an important reminder for us- If we want to connect and cultivate community in authentic ways in our life, we first have to look in the mirror and confess. Confess sometimes we are too hurried to really listen to people deeply and to spend time getting to know them.

We have to confess we sometimes use technology as an escape from reality instead of a tool to build bridges and deep relationships, we have to confess some of us have lost the art of having real conversations with people and stick to conversations that confirm what we already believe and know to be true. We must confess many of us don't like to be vulnerable with others.

Brene Brown, a social scientist who has done years of research on vulnerability and belonging said this about belonging... "As it turns out, men and women who have the deepest sense of true belonging are people who also have the courage to stand alone when called to do that."

It's easy when we're in a flock of 100 to just let the world go by, munch on grass, and stick by those we know and agree with.

Zumbro friends, can we stop and be vulnerable for a moment.

Do we collectively as a church notice those in our church and community and nation and world that are wandering off alone in the wilderness?

I believe we want to... and we really try to most days, right...-its why we feed the hungry burritos and show up to the same communities' week after week with the yellow truck.

It's why we're partnering with LSS to open a drop-in center for kids and young adults who are at risk for homelessness.

It's why we send cards to our homebound and why we will continue to build small groups and spaces to build safe and vulnerable community within our church.

It's why there have been protests for the past several weeks across the world—we're reminding each other (and the powers that be) that every single black life matters—that our flock isn't complete without George Floyd or Breanna Taylor, and now Raychard Brooks .

Many of us have for too long had not had to notice the systems and ideologies that harm people —so the 99 other sheep (in the shape of literally millions of people protesting) these past few weeks have said enough is enough were not complete without all 100.

Cultivating connection and community with others is brave and hard work. It's literally a constant task we're called to—to pay attention to our community—to take count and make sure everyone is with us. The shepherd cannot do the work alone—the rest of the flock has to count and count and count until we get 100 every. Single. Time.

And lastly, Let's look at the Shepherd character—of course this one is particularly tricky—because the Shepherd is so often the God figure. And hear me that is a very good and holy and right reading.

But what if you this morning you imagined yourself as the shepherd? Not as God saving the world, but a shepherd.

Can you imagine yourself tending to a flock—tending to a community—in your home or workplace. In your church or neighborhood or school. What if you leaned into your call as a shepherd?

I am pretty convinced this epidemic of loneliness has a vaccine already out there available. It's human connection and belonging.

What if we as the church simply looked at our most important work as shepherding and cultivating human connection with grace and love like God does. What if every day you found a way to prioritize human connection. With your spouse or partner. With your children or grandchildren or other family members? With your colleagues and neighbors? With your friends and even those you don't know? And of course, with God?

In a country plagued with an epidemic of loneliness we need so many shepherds tending to the lost, wandering, and forgotten. Shepherds who remind others there is a way home and way out and way through. We need shepherds.

Friends, in the end—this story and so many others reminds us we need each other.. have you ever thought of that fact that almost every good story ends with something or most often someone being found. It's the princess or prince being swept off their feet by true love. It's a wizard being found in his broken family and being taken away to discover his true self. It's the superhero rescuing the civilian from the villain.

It's the parent or friend intervening in just at the right time to save the prodigal child. Whether its Cinderella or Harry Potter or Marvel Comics or breakfast club or Marry Poppins or sesame street or ESPN athlete stories or a God who loves us enough to become human and save us...we yearn and love stories about real human connection.

I think we are suckers for lost and found stories because it feeds our basic human need to not be alone. We actually need to be found and be in a safe and brave space surrounded by a flock who loves us and sees us. God even said it at the very beginning-it is not good for humans to be alone.

If this season of 2020 has taught us anything-and friends surely it has already, right-we cannot waste this season to learn...perhaps a piece of new life that we will walk away from it is an awaking to the truth once again that we need each other-God created that way. Not in some abstract spiritual way but in a real, we're fully connected and lost with out each other way.

Amen.