

Barre Congregational Church

September 11, 2022: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ **Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost** ~

“Jesus, the sheep, and sinners”

Our services can be found on our website at www.barrechurch.com

Scripture Reading: Luke 15 1-10

I. Introduction:

In today's life, we all have something to take care of, all those whom we love and cherish. It could be our children, our parents and grandparents, our pets, and our homes, and more. Finding ourselves in situations of caring for others, is special, sometimes satisfactory, and other times challenging. We also sometimes need a shepherd ourselves to take care of us, because at times we are doing well, and other times not so...

II. God's love for every human being, every sinner...

This passage is once again a reminder of how God views people with all our differences and how we as human beings look at people. In God's eyes we are all the same, precious, and sinful human beings who need God's saving grace in our lives. And, in God's eyes every human being is worth saving, because of God's love for all of us. No one is being rejected because their sins are too big and awful. What a reminder for us... Here in Luke, Jesus is displaying the perfect love of God as He is surrounded by tax collectors and sinners. In the previous passage Jesus ends by saying, those who have ears to hear, let them hear. These tax collectors and sinners came to listen to Him, because His message showed them that He cared for them.

But then there are those who scrutinize every move Jesus is making, still not understanding, or accepting His purpose for being there. It is clear that the Pharisees and the Scribes look at people around them through a specific lens. There are those according to the Old Testament laws who need to be despised and that's the way it should be, they say. Look at Him, they exclaim! "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." This is a judgment by these religious leaders and leaders of the Old Testament law that makes a

specific group or groups of people irredeemable. These leaders have power to decide who are the outcasts of society and who receives mercy or not.

The tax collectors did in fact lead dishonorable lives, says David E. Garland in his commentary on Luke. They had a reputation for being dishonest, and therefore lived outside the law, he says, hence the Pharisees and Scribes' objection to Jesus' mixing with "these people", and His unwillingness to bring them under the judgment of the law. Earlier in Luke Chapter 3 we see John's warnings to the crowd as he was baptizing them. He warns the crowd to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. He calls them vipers and warns that every tree that does not produce fruit will be cut down by the axe that is ready for the task. Given this grim message, the tax collectors ask him what they should do, and he answered them not to collect more money they are required to take. They should live a life that is just and socially responsible. During the New Testament period, the Roman Government had local people collect the taxes, extorting more money from the people, that's why they were hated so much. One can therefore say the scrutiny of Jesus by the Pharisees and Scribes is justified, but from Jesus' perspective, those who sin, not the ones who believe they are the righteous ones, need Him. He stands and sits and dines with sinners and unjust tax collectors, not to judge them but to understand, to teach, and to use an opportunity to help them see why He is there for them, to open their hearts for the love of God, and for the change of hearts and minds, behaviors and actions.

This kind of love and divine power, of respect for humanity is beyond our human understanding, beyond the world and its judgments of people. It is God with us, through the birth and ministry of the Son of God, who came to teach a different kind of love and human embrace and forgiveness than what the world offers.

III. Jesus, the sheep and sinners

And so, He tells them the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin to illustrate how the shepherd and this woman will go to great length to search and find that which is lost. Even though the shepherd (s) may have a large flock of sheep, they would not leave the lost sheep to stray and left to die or taken by someone else. This one sheep is as important as

the rest; but more, this lost sheep must be sought after, and when it is found it is picked up, carried on the shoulders of the shepherd, and then there is communal rejoicing afterwards!

And so, like the sheep, those human beings who are lost, who have been put in a category of outcast and lesser than, and irredeemable, now have the Son of God on their side, to love and to search for them, dine with them, and forgive and rejoice with them now that they have been found and have a new life with God. Garland says, "God will take endless trouble to find and bring them back". Jesus' interest was not just to heal spiritually, and physically, but also to reach into the hearts and souls of those who feel lost, because of rejection by society. He would stay with them, to make sure they feel safe and cared for.

IV. Conclusion:

This passage has a simple message, a message that must be heard, digested, weighed, and lived out. First, we all need to understand that as church people, we have been sought after, not just as being part of this church, or being invited, or visiting here at Barre Congregational church, and I know there are stories about how you came to be here... but we all have been sought after by a power larger than us to find our place here. We have been sought and found by God. This passage also speaks about all those who feel alone, lost, abandoned by their specific circumstances. Sometimes it is hard to knock on a church door to be among people one doesn't know. So, we are called to pray for those who need a church home where they can find community among the flock. And then there is the feeling of being lost, away from God. That feeling can be among us, even though we are here. Sometimes we feel empty, unhappy, disconnected from a prayer life with God. This can be us, inasmuch as it can be the other whom we think is lost because they are not with us.

This parable calls for an intimate relationship with God, and a relationship of care for the ones who need us, our love, our time, our care. May God help us to be courageous in speaking up for those who feel different and lost, who are being judged by those who feel righteous and powerful over others. May God help us to respond to this call of being shepherds today where we are, looking, searching, praying for, and changing this world to be more and more a place of inclusion, of peace, justice, and love. Amen