

Sermon 15 Sept 2013
Luke 15:1-10 Lost and Found

Nikolai has a favourite icon of Jesus carrying the no longer lost sheep on his shoulders. The sheep is looking at Jesus. Jesus is emerging from the icon dressed in red but swathed in blue. He is looking a bit bemused, I think, like when one is in the middle of doing something, and is surprised by a camera, but he also looks very comfortable. Jesus is carrying the sheep comfortably on his shoulders. The way I carry Jacque, my cat. He is relaxed and in his own skin.

It is an image of care and purpose, elucidated by today's reading, an image Nikolai uses to symbolise intercessory prayer. The context is that Jesus is going about his business, teaching, healing, hanging out, and people are drawn to him, including some unsavoury folk like collaborators with the occupying force, those despised of people, and sinners.. those who for whatever reason, poverty, social position, occupation, choice, could not or did not keep the letter of the law.

So the insiders, the good churchgoing people, grumbled.
'This fellow welcomes outsiders, and accepts their hospitality, making him unclean, tainted by association.'

William Loader reflects:

'Jesus actually enters into close relations with tax collectors and sinners by dining with them. He takes them seriously as people. He values them as persons and meets them on their terms. He is not prepared to write them off, as his critics did, or to say, as they would have: we will value you and welcome only if you repent. Until then we are staying away or if we come near you it will only be to preach to you to change.'

What are the limits of our tolerance? Who would we not like to see in church here? What would people say if they saw who we hang out with?

Jesus responds to these accusations in his usual fashion, with some stories, some stories about lost things, and people's response. Hilarious stories really. He likens God to a shepherd, and a woman. He talks of going out there actively looking for the lost ones, looking for them because they are lost. Looking for them because he cares. Then when he/she finds them, celebrating with great joy! I don't know what happens to the other sheep while the shepherd is gone.

Buechner writes: ('Telling The Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale.')

'God is the comic shepherd who gets more of a kick out of that one lost sheep once he finds it again than out of the ninety and nine who had the good sense not to get lost in the first place. God is the eccentric host who, when the country-club crowd all turn out to have other things more important to do than come live it up with him, goes out into the skid rows and soup kitchens and charity wards and brings home a freak show. The man with no legs who sells shoelaces at the corner. The old woman in the moth-eaten fur coat who makes her daily rounds of the garbage cans. The old wino with his pint in a brown paper bag. The pusher, the whore, the village idiot who stands at the blinker light waving his hand as the cars go by. They are seated at the damask-laid table in the great hall. The candles are all lit and the champagne glasses filled. At a sign from the host, the musicians in their gallery strike up "Amazing Grace." If you have to explain it, don't bother.

He says 'I think that these parables can be read as jokes about God in the sense that what they are essentially about is the outlandishness of God who does impossible things with impossible people, and I believe that the comedy of them is not just a device for making the truth that they contain go down easy but that the truth that they contain can itself be thought of as comic.'

<http://frederickbuechner.com/content/weekly-sermon-illustration-one-lost-sheep>

Loader comments:

'It makes sense to see both the parables as stories of self defence on the part of Jesus. Luke suggests as much by the way he introduces them. The controversy is not over whether Jesus called sinners to repent. If that was all Jesus was doing as well as taking his soapbox into the arena of sinners, then he would have been the hero of those Pharisees.

Rather the issue was that he already demonstrated a willingness to value them as persons and enter relations with them as people of worth before there was any repentance. This was an expression of love.

The love was unconditional. But it was also very challenging, because he was also inviting them as valued people to become part of the future vision. He was not doing so in order to make them valued and worthy of love, but because they were valued and loved. The distinction is subtle but significant.

Both ways involve repentance in its best sense, but one way puts the focus on the deeds and the laws, and the other puts the focus on the person and possibility of transformation. One tends to focus on the fruit; the other, on the tree, itself. There is all the difference in the world between telling the tree it must produce good fruit and tending to its real needs which make such fruit bearing possible.'

<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost17.htm>

God always finds us when we are lost. When we are lost and found, our usual ways of perceiving and responding to life are transformed. It is not about repentance but more about transformation.

Being lost is part of the human journey of growth. We have to allow ourselves to be lost, to fall, in order to grow. God is the one who is with us in our lostness, who searches with us, waits with us, who sits with us at the bottom of our Alice in Wonderland rabbit hole, in our lostness.

'Getting lost, falling down that rabbit hole, is messy, fearful, curious.' says Lucy Abbott Tucker. Jesus has been there. He knows that place. (ansd conference talk Lucy Abbott Tucker 13 September 2013)

Joseph Campbell says, 'The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek'...

We find it is not a cave but is in fact, a long dark tunnel that leads to new light.

John of the Cross writes

...'and when you are in the dark do not look for a companion who knows the way out of the darkness, but one who has been in the dark herself/himself.'

I invite you to stay with the image of the shepherd looking for one lost sheep, and the woman searching for her lost coin, and the father looking out for his lost son, and of Jesus:

“who welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Where do you place yourself?

What do you want?

Susanna Pain