



Sermon of August 29, 1999



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"IMAGINE A WORLD"

Ezekiel 34:11-16

Matthew 18:10-20

I have just returned from my vacation, part of which was spent in Canada fishing for salmon. I notice there always seems to be a curiosity when I come back from a fishing trip to know if I caught anything, and if so, how big was it?

I can usually exercise the necessary latitude to describe my catch appropriately, but this time I was with several members of this congregation. They happen to be in this service this morning as well, so I am forced to limit what I say, and this is it. There is more to fishing than catching the big one.

Prior to that I was in Michigan for a week of preaching and teaching at Bay View, a summer community up on the lower peninsula of Michigan, on Lake Michigan. Bay View is one of the

Chatauqua communities that sprung out of Lake Chatauqua, New York, that community founded by Methodists over a hundred years ago in upstate New York as an opportunity for religious inspiration in the summertime by the lake, and also an opportunity for enrichment of one's life with culture, art, and ideas. It was sort of a northern version of the southern camp meeting. Families would go to their summer houses at the lake in an idyllic setting.

In some places that still happens. Pacific Grove, incidentally, up the coast at Monterey, was founded by Methodists as a Chatauqua community. The Chatauqua is gone now, but that little town is still there. Ocean Grove in New Jersey is another one that is still operating. In fact I will be there next Sunday preaching on the last weekend of the summer season.

At Bay View in Michigan, in addition to preaching, I taught a class on the parables. I was captured once again with the importance of that parable for the life of the early Church. You can tell it was important to the Church by the way it is used in the New Testament. It appears the session, several members of the class told me that they had been raised in churches that still practice what is called "shunning." The person who has done wrong is excluded from the community. The righteous having no dealings with them, not even to talk to them, until they repent sufficiently by the standards of righteousness to be accepted back into the community.

I can remember when I was the pastor of another church, a family from one of those churches, after a prayerful discussion, decided that they wanted to become Methodists, join our church. They said, "As a result of this, our parents are going to cut us off, and they will never speak to us again."

I was also reminded of that scene in Alan Paton's wonderful novel, *Too Late the Phalarope*, set in the stern Dutch Calvinist community in South Africa at the turn of the century, where religion was as harsh and severe as it was among the Pharisees. The father of the family learns that his son has had an affair with an African woman. He goes to the family Bible, takes a pen, dips it in the ink, and scratches his son's name from the list of family members at the front of the Bible. Then he takes some boards, and he nails the boards across the front door of the house, to say that his son is banned from entering this house again forever and ever. For now he is a sinner, and the righteous have no dealings with sinners.

The world into which Jesus came preaching was that kind of world, divided between the righteous and the sinner. They just assumed that God blesses the righteous, and curses the sinner.

So the Pharisees and the scribes were murmuring, "This man receives and sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable.

What man of you having a hundred sheep, if he lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it. And when he comes home he calls his friends and neighbors together, saying, "Rejoice with me. For I have found the sheep which was lost."

Jesus told parables for a reason. A parable has a special kind of meaning. A parable is a story that engages you. It often starts familiarly, like you've heard this before. But then it turns, ever so

subtly, so as to draw you to a conclusion that is a surprise to you, that you never expected.

The best definition of a parable is to say that it gets you to imagine a different kind of world, a world different than the one that you are accustomed to. It opens your eyes so that you can see things that you had never seen before. So with the parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus is saying, imagine a world where the sinners, the lost, the outcasts, the condemned and the banished are as precious to God as are the righteous.

Imagine such a world. And when Jesus, in the Gospel of John, says, "I am the Good Shepherd," he is saying that in him God is coming to us, to all of us, to take us back home, to form a new community in this world, a new family, where we are all brothers and sisters, and the walls that divide us in this world are no longer there. They are down, and we are one family, under the fatherhood of God.

That's what shocked them. Because it meant that when God comes to us, God forgives us before we repent. "While we are yet sinners," Paul said, "Christ died for us." Paul couldn't get over that. Paul said he used to be a "pharisee of Pharisees." So he couldn't get over this unmerited grace. He said, that's the gospel, that's what's new, God takes the initiative, and forgives us before we repent.

Oh Pharisees and scribes believed God forgives the sinner, but only on the condition of a satisfactory repentance. The gospel proclaims that God loves us even while we are sinners. God takes the initiative and comes to us where we are, and loves us as we are. That is what he is saying.

In Luke this is said with the utmost clarity in the 15th chapter, which starts with the parable of the Lost Sheep, where a shepherd leaves the righteous, who don't stray, and goes after the lost, and then rejoices.

Back to back with that parable is the parable of the Lost Coin, where a woman who has lost a coin, sweeps her house clean so she can find the coin. When she finds it, she invites her neighbors to come in so that they can rejoice with her, because she has found her lost coin.

Back to back with the parable of the Lost Coin is the parable, the famous and loved parable, of the Prodigal Son who was lost, and is found. The father throws a party to celebrate, and the older son, the righteous one, is furious that a prodigal, a sinner, would receive grace without deserving it.

By lining up these parables back to back, all in a row, Luke makes the point unmistakable, that by the standards of this world, the world that you and I live in, it is appropriate to rejoice over property that has been found, like a sheep or a coin. In this world property, and especially money, are worth sacrificing for, and rejoicing over. But, Jesus says, imagine a different world where people are more important than things, and human values are more important than property values, where sinners are not shunned or banished or ostracized, but are sought out, and redeemed.

Imagine such a world. That is what Matthew does when he uses this parable. He applies it to an

actual situation in his church. It is a question of repentance and forgiveness, which comes first? It was an issue in the early Church, as it is an issue with us. Which comes first, repentance or forgiveness? He sees this issue before the Church as an opportunity for the Church to practice the lesson that Jesus taught us with the parable of the Lost Sheep.

You heard Matthew's version read for you this morning. Something obviously happened in that church. We don't know what it was, but something happened. We do know this, however, the Church reacted to what happened in the expected way, in the way of the world, as it were. They were still operating under those traditions and rules of what you do with people who do something wrong. They still assumed that God blesses the righteous, and curses the sinner. So they shunned him, they would have nothing to do with him. They thought that was what God would want them to do. It was not a formal excommunication. The Church had not started doing that yet. They just stopped communicating.

No communication. That is a form of banishment. We know that. We practice that all the time. That's the family form of punishment. We stop communicating. If you really want to punish someone for messing up, for not living up to your expectations, or for insulting you in some way, then stop communication with them. Just isolate them. Leave them alone.

I was counseling a couple. The man was unfaithful to his wife, but he was repentant. He begged for forgiveness from her. He wanted reconciliation, wanted to start over again. I asked the woman, "Can you forgive him?" "No," she said, "He hasn't suffered enough yet."

You see when Luke tells the parable of the Lost Sheep, he prefaces it with the Pharisees and the scribes murmuring, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." But when Matthew prefaces the parable he has Jesus put a child in the midst of the disciples, and say, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Have you ever known a child to bear a grudge? You've got to be grown up to do that. Revenge is a learned behavior. When our children were young, I can remember that they would dry their tears and start playing with those with whom they had just been fighting, or arguing with, or were angry at. Sometimes it took a little intervention and persuasion, but it was amazing to me as an adult, because they didn't have any trouble doing that. They weren't interested in holding grudges. They weren't interested in making people pay. They learn that from adults.

But Jesus reverses that. He puts a child in their midst. Can you imagine a child not forgiving? "Unless you become like a child, you cannot enter the kingdom of God." Then he tells the parable, "A man has a hundred sheep. One goes astray. Does he not leave the ninety-nine and seek the one who is lost?"

Matthew offers practical advice on how to deal with the sinner in that local church. The most important part of the advice is that he says, take the initiative, do something, go to that person, talk to that person about what the problem is and seek reconciliation with that person. Then he gives provisions if this does not work out. After you have tried, go get two more people from the church and take them, too. If that doesn't work, take the whole church. And if that doesn't work, then you can let it go.

But the point is, try to do something. The point is, take the initiative. Just as God has sought you out before you repented, so you should seek out those from whom you are estranged. Don't sit back in self-righteousness because you are right and they are wrong. Don't sit back in smugness because you haven't done what they have done. And don't sit back in pride because you do all things excellently and they make dumb mistakes. Don't sit there and do nothing. That's the way the world works.

Imagine a new world. Imagine a world that Jesus came to establish where prodigality is not the only sin, separation is also a sin. "For God so loved the world he sent his Son," to be like a shepherd, seeking out the lost with grace.

Scott Peck wrote his famous book, *The Road Less Traveled*, many years ago now. He is a psychiatrist, you remember, who discovered the power of religion to heal. That is, positive religion, grace-ful religion. It caused quite a stir when the book was published because it was unusual for a psychiatrist, especially in those days, to give credit to religion. Psychiatry was labeled as generally anti-religious as a result of seeing so many lives that had been messed up by negative and oppressive religion.

But Peck saw the healing power of positive religion. In that book he likened it to the force of nature that seeks to heal and to redeem. He pointed out that in all of our bodies there is what we call a "defense mechanism." We tend to take it for granted until a disease comes along, like AIDS, that reminds us how fragile our life is, and how susceptible to disease all of us are. Yet for the most part we are protected from disease by a force, a power within us that we are not even aware of which daily protects us.

All of this is amazing, he said, when you realize from a scientific point of view, the fundamental law of nature, the most basic fact about all life, is that it is breaking down and disintegrating. That is called "entropy," the second law of thermodynamics. It is true universally. Life breaks down, disintegrates. Everything is supposed to do that. That is the law. That is what you would expect.

But there is this other power that counters entropy, that builds up, that heals, that recreates. He said that in psychiatry it is possible for us to explain why somebody is ill. We know why somebody has messed up their life. We can point to the incident that has caused this to happen. In fact we all do that. We are all arm-chair psychiatrists. Some of us are indeed experts at analyzing what's wrong with other people's lives, why they are the way they are. We can point to some incident in their life that caused them to be the way they are. We are experts at that.

What we can't predict, what we can't explain, is why they change, why they get better, why they grow up, why they turn around, why they are healed. But that happens, too. That happens every day, by grace.

Peck tells the story of a man who came to see him with a problem, which he took care of very easily. He wasn't very sick at all, but Peck said that he should be, considering what happened to him in his life. He told his story.

He was born into the Chicago slums. His mother was unmarried, and also deaf and mute. A

single parent with handicaps trying to raise a child. At the age of five he was taken away from his mother because the state decided the mother was not capable of raising a child. He was placed in a series of foster homes where he got no affection and little attention. At fifteen he had a brain aneurysm that broke and caused a paralysis. He moved out on his own at the age of seventeen. At eighteen he was arrested for assault. He was put on probation and given a job as a stock clerk.

Now if that is all that you knew about him, Peck said, you could predict what the rest of his life would be like. I bet every one of us could write the scenario of what this boy's life is going to be like as an adult.

But it didn't happen that way. He said he became a success in that company. In time he left and started his own company, which was equally successful. He received wealth and recognition. He married happily. He had children. He educated himself. He became interested in the arts and in ideas. He was recognized by his community.

If he messed up his life, we could explain it. We can point to the reason. We can say, that's the reason because of his childhood. But he succeeded, and we don't know why. All we can say is, it's a miracle. Or, once I was blind but now I see. Or, she who was lost has been found. And there was great rejoicing.

You see the world is divided, the world we live in, between good and bad, righteous and sinners. That is the world of entropy. That's the world that is disintegrating, breaking down. That's the world of death.

Jesus says, imagine a different world of reconciliation, redemption, forgiveness, and grace. For there is a power in this world that heals, and builds up, and recreates, and renews. So don't just sit there. Do something. Go to the one who has offended you and offer forgiveness. Do what you can, that's all you can do. Do what you can. Be a part of the healing of the world, and not a part of the disease.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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