

Community Church of Issaquah

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Lessons Learned:

The Parable of The Lost Sheep

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I know how you are. If I told you I grew up in Mississippi, you would probably think I either lived in a mobile home or on a farm. Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I actually grew up in the city – the big city and capitol of the state, Jackson. But to be perfectly honest, I did have a few farmer relatives on my mother's side of the family. As a youngster, I begged my mom to let me go visit my great uncle Reuben's farm and after annoying her for days on end, she finally relented. I was going to spend three days way out in the country, and I was beside myself.

There were cows and chickens, just like a real farm, and I was going to be a real farmer for three whole days! Of course, plans have a way of not always working out for us if you know what I mean. Keep in mind that this was in the 1950's and things were a bit different for some rural residents. Uncle Reuben didn't have indoor plumbing, so there were trips to the outhouse during the day and the use of a bed pan at night. And of course, there were the unexpected and unfamiliar things to deal with.

The first night, Uncle Reuben's son, Jackie, asked me if I wanted to go on a "snipe hunt." "Absolutely," was my response out of ignorance. Do any of you know what a snipe hunt is? It's really just a joke to make people – usually kids – look dumb. So, there I was roaming around the pastures looking up into the trees and calling, "Here, snipe. Here, snipe" while Jackie laughed hysterically. He finally took pity on me and told me the story. I didn't think it was funny.

When we got back to the house, Uncle Reuben was already in bed and the lights were turned off. Not being familiar with the house, I was just trying to feel my way back to the bed on the back porch where I was to sleep. Suddenly I fell over something propped beside a chair in the living room. It was a leg! Actually, it was Uncle Reuben's artificial leg, but it scared me to death. Needless to say, being a farmer quickly lost it lure and I could not wait to get home.

Perhaps one of the most difficult parts of reading and preaching from the Bible is that it's hard to identify with at times. Today's passages from the Scriptures talks about sheep. I've never been close enough to a sheep to touch one and know little about them. But did you know that in the Bible, sheep are mentioned more than 500 times, the word "flock" appears more than 200 times, and the word shepherd is one of the most common references to what someone does in life. For years I wondered why all this talk about sheep and shepherds. Then I visited the areas outside of cities like Jerusalem, Bethlehem and more, and on every hillside, there were herds of sheep with a shepherd standing or sitting nearby. It began to make sense. We write about what we know, this is what the writers of the Scriptures knew about – sheep.

Often, members of a congregation or followers of a particular person are called sheep. Personally, with more than 35 years as a pastor, I never thought of myself as a shepherd or the members of my church as sheep. I did have a member once who said the same thing every week as I shook his hand as he left the sanctuary. "Vincent, you're the best 'pasture' we ever had." I was flattered to think he viewed me as a shepherd leading my flock to better places to be. Then I realized he was just giving a Kansas pronunciation of the title, 'pastor.'

The story of the one sheep that was lost, then found is one that is evident in its message. If one person in one hundred is lost, the shepherd – God

– will seek that one until it is found. And once found, there will be great rejoicing. But there is a lot more to that story if we delve deeper. Though this passage and others like it focus on the sheep, hidden in this parable is the lessons we can learn about the shepherd. In these verses, the shepherd is the Lord seeking the lost. But in our everyday world, we sometimes fail to pay attention to those who are in a place of shepherding the sheep, or followers of Christ.

This passage today is not so much about sheep as it is about the shepherds. The analogy is a familiar one to the people of that day. They understood quite well that a shepherd was someone with the responsibilities of watchful caring of a flock of sheep. The writers of the Bible and people in general knew what a shepherd was to do, and if the reference was to shepherding people, then it was even more important. God’s message through the prophet Jeremiah is abundantly clear. If a shepherd scatters or drives away the flock, there will be a huge price to pay. As God says it, “So I will attend to you for your evil doings.” If you were a shepherd or leader, would you take that to mean that if you harm the sheep, you’ll be in really big trouble with the Lord.

Throughout the history of humankind, people (I’ll use that word instead of sheep for a few minutes if you don’t mind) have trusted in a person believing that person is sent from God with a message they need to hear. As a minister, I know that when I stand to preach the Gospel, I need to both honestly and correctly speak up for the Lord. I am well aware that if I fail in that, there is always a price to pay, so I work hard to simply preach what Christ teaches. I make a solid effort not to twist the words for my own benefit. I take seriously the words of Joe Friday from the old TV program that probably none of you remember. Joe the detective would tell anyone he was questioning, “Just the facts, ma’am, just the facts.”

Sometimes however, there are shepherds who want to interpret the Scriptures for their own good, and their trusting and believing flock swallow every word. I won't mention the current flock following the current host of shepherds. I don't have to. There are other examples. Way back in 1978, a very well-respected preacher named Jim Jones had built quite a following for himself as an evangelist. He had been appointed Chairman of the San Francisco Housing Commission by then mayor, George Moscone. When he had moved his followers from the Bay Area to Guyana, problems emerged when the truth about his new colony called Jonestown arose and the US government was asked to step in and do something.

When a US Congressman and some of the relatives of some followers were murdered after touring the facilities by some of Rev. Jones guards, news spread quickly, and a decision was made to either take all the 918 people in the compound to Russia or to order a mass suicide. All 918 of Jim Jones followers died that day in 1978, including 304 children. One fact often overlooked was that 70 percent of those who died were Black. It was the largest single loss of civilian life until 9/11. Tragic results of sheep following the wrong shepherd.

In 1993, a young man named Vernon Howell, a member of the Seventh Day Adventist tradition had maneuvered his way into a leadership position within a break-away group called the Branch Davidian. Believing that the apocalypse or end of the world was near, they gathered followers and eventually located just outside of Waco, Texas at an encampment called Mount Carmel. Proclaiming that God has spoken to him in a vision, Howell changed his name to David Koresh and established himself as God's spokesperson. Women followers were instructed that they could have sexual relations only with him and their husbands must remain celibate. He fathered at least 14 children by these

women and girls as young as 13. God had told him he could he told his flock.

The ATF and FBI became concerned about a buildup of guns and weapons and secured a warrant to search the groups of the facilities. An exchange of gunshots left several agents and Davidians dead, and a standoff resulted that lasted for 51 days. The assault on the compound was deadly. The Mount Carmel Center building caught fire amidst all the gun fire, agents and followers were shot, and as a result of the chaos, 76 people perished, including infants and children.

These are extreme examples, of course, of people blindly following a leader they believe to be a messenger of God. The verses in Samuel's prophecy are clear that the Lord will attend to those shepherds and leaders who have scattered or driven away any of the flock. It was a warning for shepherds to beware of ill-doing. I believe it still applies today to any who would lead God's sheep astray. They will pay a price.

But there is beautiful promise that you and I need to claim as our own, especially in these days when we see so many blindly following leaders who consistently do damage to God's flock – His sheep. The Lord says, "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock; I will bring them back into their fold; I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing." God will send His shepherd to seek the one lost sheep while the other 99 wait for all to be reunited.

I am clinging to that promise, and as I do, I am becoming more focused on my own role as a minister, pastor, or shepherd. I believe I am compelled to preach only the true Gospel of Christ, the Gospel of love and a Gospel that is welcoming and caring, a Gospel where we can all graze in fruitful fields and be fed. And I believe that those who believe

that Gospel and follow in the steps of Christ are truly His sheep. Each of us should remind ourselves of one unshaken truth, it was found in our reading of the 23rd Psalm this morning. Do you remember it? “The Lord is MY shepherd” or as it was translated, “You, Lord are My shepherd.” We must never forget that. Never.