

“Waste Not, Want Not”

Luke 15:1-10

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I agree with almost everything Jesus says. Not that I always do it what he says, a flaw of us all, but he’s almost always right. His wisdom is superior to mine, yours, and all the angels. However, the lectionary tonight takes us to the one passage in which for years, I have thought Jesus is off the mark. You see, I think it is madness to risk 99 sheep to go and look for one lost one. Now, maybe I’m too much of a city boy to understand the parable, but I don’t think even a shepherd with his livelihood invested in the sheep would think that was a good idea. Pretty soon one lost sheep becomes a dozen, and then fifty, and pretty soon, while the one lost sheep is still playing hide and go seek, the rest of the flock has headed off for greener pastures.

In fact, it is using Jesus’ strategy that has caused many a church to find itself in conflict, rather than rejoicing. Focusing more on the one parishioner with a gripe than on the 99 anxious to get to work, or worrying more about the pastoral needs of a chronic few within the church than the hurts and hopes of the many who have yet to darken its doors, has led many a church to wonder why they continue to struggle to attract members or have a meaningful presence in their community. As well-intentioned as those efforts may be, they have failed to understand that the main duty of a shepherd is not actually, as Jesus describes, to seek out the one lost sheep,

but rather to guide the whole flock to food, water, and safety.

I was pleased to learn, however, in digging a little more deeply into this passage, that I am not really in disagreement with Jesus, because leaving behind the ninety-nine is not really what Jesus is proposing that we do as church members or church leaders. In fact, Jesus' parable was designed not to encourage his audience into action, but rather to zing them for their spiritual blindness and heartlessness. Remember that those who were being addressed were the Pharisees and the scribes who were grumbling that "all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him." "Which one of you," he says, "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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 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." "Which one of you?" Jesus asks. Well, the answer is, of course, none of them. None of them have done it, none of them would ever do it, and in their defense, none of them should do it. But lest we think Jesus is criticizing them for staying at home with the ninety nine, let us remember the true punchline of the parable: "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." The problem, I think, is not that the Pharisees and the Scribes have not gone out into the streets looking for the least, the last, and the lost. It is that they resent the one who did,

and cannot recognize the significance of that grace, nor celebrate it, wrapped up as they are in their own righteousness.

We see this over and over again in the Gospels. Did they throw a party when the demons left the man called Legion? Or did they run Jesus out of town as quick as they could? Did they celebrate when the man born blind received his sight? Or did they question him endlessly? Did they crowd excitedly around the women who stood up straight after being bent over for twenty years and wish her well and offer what they could to make her life even better? Or did they say she should have come back another day of the week to get healed? In all three of the parables in this fifteenth chapter of Luke, which ends with the parable of the Prodigal Son, the emphasis is on the celebration of God's grace – "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost; Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost; We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." Rejoice and celebrate, Jesus says. But time after time, the scribes and Pharisees waste the opportunity to celebrate the wonder of God, and go away wanting, even if they don't realize it, righteous but resentful. Waste not, want not, as the old saying goes.

That old saying, "Waste not, want not," is indeed an old one, first recorded in 1772. It is a proverb that speaks to the virtue of thrift, not for its own sake, but for survival's sake. Although it could be applied to keeping that extra sweater in the closet for an especially cold day, it is more meaningful when applied to an 18th

century reality like conserving the kitchen scraps for the pig to eat, so that you could later eat the pig. In a context of lack, of shortage and scarcity, the virtue of saving takes on an even greater urgency. These are good words to live by in any age, but apparently by the eighteenth century they had lost some of the moral urgency of their earlier, more alliterative version, *willful waste makes woeful want*, a saying which goes back all the way to the year 1576, and which even better describes the attitude Jesus seems to be criticizing in our passage tonight. Benign neglect of the good news is bad enough, but to campaign against it, willfully as it were, as Jesus' opponents consistently did, is all the more tragic. It is not like there was an abundance of grace flowing around the occupied territory of Israel, coming from either the Jews or the Romans, and so to try to shut the valve when it began flowing from Jesus was all the more woeful. Of course, this wasn't the first time God's people had squandered God grace. The whole message of the Old Testament prophets can be summed up by "Waste not, want not," as the kings wasted the grace and blessing found in the commandments and covenants given to them by God, and found themselves, and their people, in great want, both economic and spiritual, all the way in Babylon.

In some senses we live today in a context of a scarcity of grace, or at least graciousness. In the political discourse of our nations we find little more than polemic, and when one party or another tries to do something for the good, the other side grumbles and obstructs, and the citizenry becomes more and more

disillusioned with government. In the theological debates of our churches, the way forward is promoted through the extremes of diversity or orthodoxy, with threats of schism contributing to the growing discouragement with so-called organized religion. In the clash between the proponents and the opponents of socioeconomic globalization, the stakes behind the false choice between competition and cooperation leave one side holed up in a resort hotel, and the other marching outside in the streets, but each side talking only to its own supporters instead of conversing with one another about the future of the planet. What all these contested arenas have in common is more than a simple conflict of opinion or worldview. That stuff is inevitable, and even valuable. The marketplace of ideas is not inherently a bad thing. But what each of these arenas lacks, and yet what is more crucial for their success than any good idea, new policy or spiritual insight, what is more crucial than anything else is a celebration of what's right in government, or religion, or economics, and a graciousness of spirit to acknowledge it in the other side as well your own side. We get the occasional glimpse of that celebration and that graciousness, but indeed, there is most definitely a scarcity of grace in the conversations which matter most to the world and its inhabitants.

The good news, however, is that the scarcity of grace is limited only to our consumption, and not to its divine production. You see, the scarcity of grace is a well-crafted illusion designed to provide a false sense of security to those who think they possess what little of it is left in the world, just like the scribes and

Pharisees did in trying to hold on to the last vestiges of what their God and their tradition had once so abundantly supplied for them. The problem is not really a lack of grace, but rather our inability to perceive it. Perhaps, in each of our souls there is some deficit of grace, but our challenge is not to hold on to what little is left, but rather to breathe in, or soak up, or drink down all the grace that God abundantly provides in Jesus Christ. Waste not, want not.

It is not, of course, enough to celebrate grace by throwing a party when God heals someone, or when a sinner repents, although it wouldn't be a bad place to start! Rather, we are called to celebrate grace by acting out the grace we have received. This is "not wasting" it, and by not wasting it, we will never lack for it in our lives. The acting out of grace is doing ministry that matters, exercising the gifts we have received, celebrating one another's victories, and sharing one another's sorrows. The acting out of grace is in being risky, not by abandoning our stewardship of the resources God has given us, but in using them as wisely and creatively as we can, by putting them to their very best use, whether they are dollars, people, or gifts of the spirit. It is here I would return to where I began, about the dubious wisdom of leaving behind the ninety-nine sheep to go after the one lost one. It seem callous, I know, to imagine leaving the one poor little sheep out in the cold, dark night, to be stalked by wolves. But you see, this parable is not really about us rescuing the lost sheep, but celebrating that it's not a choice between the one and the ninety-nine. God has us all covered, and it is our job to

rejoice and celebrate and share God's grace rather than decide who is worthy of it.

May God help us to learn how to waste not, and want not. Amen.