

“A Church of Good Shepherds for Lost Sheep”

Psalm 23
Ezek. 34: 1-16
Luke 15: 1-7
John 10: 11-15

Rev. Paul E. Capetz
Christ Church by the Sea (United Methodist), Newport Beach
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“As our God has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor and each one of us should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be little Christs to one another.”

Martin Luther

Have you ever been lost? Maybe you were driving someplace and lost the way; even with a GPS device in your car, it is still possible to get lost as I have discovered many times, since that device isn't always accurate. Being lost can be a disorienting and frightening experience. I remember being lost and getting quite scared a couple of years ago when I was in India. We had stopped in a small town to go shopping and each one of us was supposed to meet back at the bus in a few hours. I usually I have a very good sense of direction, so it's easy to find my way back from somewhere along the same route I originally came. But that day I got really lost. I didn't recognize any landmarks I had passed. What's more, the battery in my cellphone had died and I couldn't call anyone to explain what had happened or to ask for help. And I started to panic. What if the bus left without me? What if I never found my tour group again? But, after some very frightening moments, I turned a corner and, lo and behold, found myself back at the place where we had parked the bus. The relief I felt upon finding the bus was as intense as the fear I had felt at the prospect of being lost for good in the middle of India.

Experiences such as these tell us something important about what we need in order to live meaningfully in the world. We need to feel safe and secure, as well as to feel that we are living

in a world that is familiar to us. That feeling of complete safety and security is why the 23rd Psalm is so comforting to us. But there are many people in our world who feel lost all the time, and by that, I mean lost in an existential sense, not just that they can't find their way back to a tour bus. I want to talk about some of these people who are lost in this more profound sense.

Jesus told a parable, a little story, about a sheep who got lost. Since the sheep couldn't have found its way back to the fold by itself, the shepherd went in search of the lost sheep; and once it was found, the shepherd rejoiced greatly. The parable about the lost sheep is told by Jesus to explain and to defend his behavior in the face of those who accuse him of doing something scandalous. On both ends of this parable, we hear of a controversy between Jesus and his opponents who accuse him of consorting with the wrong people, people who are characterized as "sinners." Now we have to be careful not to import our understanding of "sinners" into this report about Jesus. We think of sinners as morally bad people who have committed some sin or other. But there is something different going on here in this report that Jesus associated with sinners. I think a more accurate translation of this term into our way of speaking and thinking would be to call them "losers." These are the people who had lost their way in life, possibly through no fault of their own. In the parable, the shepherd doesn't assign any moral blame to the sheep who got lost. The sheep simply got lost, through no fault of its own, and so the shepherd went to find it and to bring it back to the fold safe and sound. By implication, then, Jesus hangs out with the losers of his world in order to restore to them their sense of dignity and to assist them to find their way back into society after they have fallen through the cracks. Now, it is possible that these people might also have been guilty of certain moral failings; after all, who among us isn't guilty of moral failings now and then. But what I want to suggest is that perhaps this group of people who were looked down upon by the religious

and moral elite may lost their way in life through no fault of their own. Let me give you three examples of such people whom I have encountered.

Once I was in San Francisco and I saw a homeless man wearing a sign around his neck. It read: "I am absolutely humiliated." Whereas I often walk by homeless people who are begging for money on the street, I was stopped dead in my tracks by this man and his astonishing sign. As I looked more closely and read what he had written, I learned that this homeless man was a veteran. Here was someone who had served in our armed forces and had been honorably discharged, but who now, for whatever reason, was homeless and begging for money on the streets of San Francisco. I don't remember what I said to him, but I pulled out my wallet and gave him a \$20 bill. I knew it wasn't enough, but it was all I had left in my wallet. Whenever I see a homeless person, whether I ignore their appeal and walk on by or stop to give a little bit of money, either way I feel a sense of guilt and inadequacy. If I walk on by, I know that I have ignored my neighbor in need. If I give some money, I know that I'm only putting a band-aid on a problem that is too large and overwhelming in its proportions for me to wrap my mind around. Still, my heart breaks and I think to myself: "There go I but for the grace of God." The homeless are the lost in our society, with no place to call home, with no permanent security and safety, and constantly vulnerable to attack. I can't believe that every homeless person is guilty of some moral failing that explains why they deserve to be homeless. So, instead of calling them "sinners," let's call them "losers": it's not that they broke the moral law, but rather that they ended up as failures instead of as successes as our society measures success and failure.

Another example of someone who has lost her way is my friend Mary. Mary was my first friend in childhood. She lived just one house away from me. I am a year older than she is, and we met when I was two and she was one. We have a photo of us together at those ages.

Mary used to be quite well off; she had once been a successful professional in the field of medical technology but, when that field underwent some tumultuous changes, she was laid off. I have no reason to think she deserved it. She was a victim of a fluctuating economy. Since that time, about a decade ago, she has lost her home and has been either chronically unemployed or chronically underemployed. She often worries about how she is going to pay the rent each month. She is single so has no second income of a spouse to rely on. I have tried to help her financially as much as I can, but, again, this is never enough, since I am not a man of means myself. Mary is currently working a job for minimum-wage pay. She told me that her boss is a cruel, heartless man who gets his kicks humiliating employees in front of customers and other employees. The other day he said to Mary in front of a group of people: “How long have you been this stupid?” In tears, Mary told me that she has finally had enough, not only of her boss and this job, but of being unable to find work that pays a decent, living wage and that is commensurate with her talents and skills. She is now talking about suicide. The despair is just too much for her to handle. Mary feels like a big failure; she’s even said as much. I’ve tried to console her by telling her that none of this is her fault, but what I say doesn’t seem to matter because she knows that in the eyes of other people in our society who are doing just fine, that’s exactly what she is: a failure, a loser, a nobody. Like the man with the sign around his neck, Mary is ashamed and doesn’t know where to turn. She’s even too ashamed to ask for help.

The final example comes from an experience I had in South America. I saw a man begging on the steps of the cathedral. He had a horrible, repulsive-looking skin disease on his hands and arms. I had never seen anything like it in my life. I asked my traveling companion who is a nurse to explain what I was looking at, and he replied that this man simply did not have the money to see a doctor. My heart sank within me. How lucky I am to be able to see a doctor

whenever I need to do so! What also struck me about this situation was that people went in and out of the cathedral without even seeming to notice this man right in front of them. It was as if he was invisible. And, for all practical purposes, he was invisible. He had fallen through the cracks of his society. A few hours later at lunchtime, I asked the waitress to wrap up the food on our plates that we hadn't been able to finish; as we approached this man again on the cathedral steps, I gave him the bag of our leftover food so that at least he could have a meal that day. But, of course, that was no adequate response. Just another band-aid on a problem so large and overwhelming that I feel helpless in the face of it. I often wonder if others turn away from helping people because they feel too overwhelmed by the magnitude of what they are suffering.

As a child, I remember hearing my father once ask a friend of his about someone else he didn't yet know. My father's question was: "What's he worth?" I later learned that what my father meant by this question was: "How much money does he have?" But note how the question was formulated: "What's he worth?" I think that way of putting it is a very telling indication of how we look upon people in our society. Those who have a lot of money are worth a lot, whereas those who don't have much money aren't worth much at all. But the Bible teaches us to measure people by a different standard. Rich and poor are not the same as the righteous and the sinners, or the successes and the failures. The rich are challenged to help the poor, since God cares for the poor and expects us to do the same.

The prophet Ezekiel sharply criticized those leaders of ancient Israel who misused their positions of leadership and ignored the plight of the poor and the needy: "Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?" (Ezek. 34:2). The prophet points out that a good society needs good shepherds who assume responsibility for the common good of society as a whole; but when political leaders who are supposed to be

shepherds of their people misuse their positions of leadership for personal gain, they come under God's indictment: "You do not feed the sheep, you have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them....Thus says the LORD God, I am against the shepherds" (Ezek. 34:2-4, 10).

Like Ezekiel, Jesus contrasts good shepherds with bad shepherds. Jesus called himself "the good shepherd" who "lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). In another passage from John's gospel, he instructs his disciple Peter: "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17). Although we may not be politicians who have responsibility for being the shepherds of society as a whole, Jesus calls each one of us to be good shepherds of the lives of other people. In whatever ways we can, however large or small, we can make a difference in the lives of other people by caring for them. As a church, that is, as a group or little society of Christians, we have an even greater capacity for being good shepherds of the lives of people. Let me give some examples of what we are already doing right here and now to be good shepherds of the lives of other people.

Regularly we have homeless people who knock on the door of the church office asking for help. We have small bags of food and water ready to hand out when they come calling. Since Diana has had much experience working with the homeless population, I have asked her to show us ways that we can be even more helpful when homeless people come knocking on our door. With her assistance we are compiling a list of resources that can be printed on a postcard, so that whenever we give food to a homeless person, we can also point that person in the direction of finding more long-term help than we are currently in a position to give. She has also introduced me to other persons in the community who are already extensively involved in outreach to the homeless, including the mayor of Costa Mesa. By making connections with

these people, I hope our church can be more closely tied in with others who are working in this area. Additionally, I was recently asked by the minister at St. Mark's Presbyterian Church here in Newport Beach to join an ecumenical task force that works on issues of homelessness. In these ways our church will become more effective in its ability to assist the homeless.

The words "pastor" and "pastoral" come from the word for "shepherd." But I am not the only one in this congregation who is a pastor to others or provides pastoral care. Karen may be doing even more than I am by keeping track of who is sick or those otherwise in need and by alerting the rest of us to pray for them and to help them in any way we can. When I was away recently, she kept me abreast of what was going on, of who was in the hospital and how they were doing. This is what it means to be a good shepherd of the lives of others so that they do not get lost or fall through the cracks.

On November 9th we will have our parking lot sale. All of the proceeds from our sale will go to UMCOR, the United Methodist Committee on Relief. This is the international organization by which United Methodist Christians deliver aid to victims of natural disasters, such as the recent hurricane in Puerto Rico. And one hundred percent of all funds donated to UMCOR are used for relief aid.

These may be small things when looked at in the big scheme of things, but small things can make a huge difference in the lives of people. Helping one person at a time might not change the whole world, but it could change the way one person experiences the whole world. It is the difference between being lost and being found. As a church, that is, as a group of Christians, we can do so much more together than isolated individuals alone can do to assist the poor and needy, to seek and to find the lost sheep. I recently read about what the United Church of Christ is doing in Chicago. Together, their congregations have raised \$5.3 million to pay for

the medical bills of 6,000 families who were forced to go into debt in order to cover their medical expenses. That's truly amazing. So long as we live in a society where political leaders fail to be good shepherds of their sheep, and where the poor and needy fall through the cracks, the church has the potential to become a model of an alternative kind of society which is composed of people who are good shepherds who seek out the lost until they are found again.

I'd like our congregation to become known as a place where the lost sheep of this world could find good, trustworthy shepherds who care for them. I want people like that absolutely humiliated homeless man in San Francisco to know that he could knock on the door of Christ Church by the Sea since here he would find the help he needs to secure a new home for himself, and thus also could recover his dignity as a human being. I want people like my friend Mary to know that she has an alternative to despair and suicide right here at Christ Church by the Sea, because we are people who care, even if we don't always have an immediate answer to every practical problem such as finding a good job that pays a living wage; but, at least we'd have resources to help her find such a job. I want people like that man with the skin disease begging on the steps of the cathedral to know that he could come to Christ Church by the Sea because we'd be able to find him the medical care he needs, even if he doesn't have the money to afford a doctor. And: I want all these people to come to us without feeling shame, without feeling the stigma of being a loser in our society. I want all these people to know that when they knock on our door, they will receive the help they need, but also that we won't give this help grudgingly or with any unspoken signal that we are better than they are. The lost sheep of this world not only need to be found; they need to be loved so that they can feel their value as persons again. These lost sheep have not only been stripped of homes, jobs, and medical care. They've been stripped of their human dignity. Remember my father's question: "What's he worth?" The lost sheep of

this world know exactly that in the eyes of most of their fellow citizens, they have no worth at all. I want all these people who feel unworthy to know that they can find their worth again right here at our church.

Rodney Stark is a sociologist of religion who wrote a book about early Christianity and he asked the question why Christianity eventually succeeded in becoming the dominant religion of the Roman empire when it had begun as a persecuted sect of a small minority. After applying all the tools and insights of his sociological knowledge in order to answer this question, he came to this startling conclusion: Christianity won over the Roman world simply because Christians were kind to people. Christians took care of the sick, and didn't flee the city when a plague struck, leaving the sick behind; they visited people in prisons and brought them food; they took in widows and orphans, and rescued babies who had been exposed to the elements by parents who didn't want them; they treated women, slaves, and children with respect. Christian beliefs about God commended themselves to people because Christians were so kind. The moral example of their lives made their religious beliefs seem plausible.

If we return to Jesus' parable about the lost sheep, we see that he told this little story to explain and to justify his association with people who were unworthy in the eyes of his critics. After telling the story, Jesus said: "God has more joy over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who have no need of repentance" (Luke 15:7). As I said before, we have to be careful not to read into this term "sinners" the moral connotations we usually associate with the word "sin." Here it means the losers, the failures, the outcasts, the unworthy. Similarly, when Jesus speaks of "repentance," the word doesn't necessarily have its usual moral connotations either. It simply means: turning your life around. For example, when an alcoholic goes into recovery and stops drinking, he has turned his life around. When a homeless person

finds a home, she has turned her life around. When an unemployed person finds a good-paying job, that person's life has been turned around. When a sick person is healed, a diseased body has been turned into a healthy body and that person's life begins anew. What Jesus is saying is that God is far happier over one such person whose life has been turned around for the better than over all the rest of us who, in our complacency and smugness, presume that no changes are needed in our lives. For this reason, it has rightly been said that the purpose of the gospel is not only to comfort the afflicted but also to afflict the comfortable.

Jesus called himself the good shepherd and told a story about a good shepherd who sought and found the lost sheep. Let us be like Jesus and go out in search of the lost sheep of this world until they are found again. Let this congregation be known as a community of good shepherds for lost sheep. Or, as Martin Luther said in the words printed at the top of our order of service, let us be "little Christs to one another."