

## *Counting Sheep on the Isle of Iona*

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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I will readily admit I really have not been around many sheep in my life and I would imagine that the Pharisees and the scribes did not spend time out on the fringes of the town with the sheep. Shepherds rarely came into town and they were not the respected members of society. How could they get to synagogue if they had to be out in the field all day? If the scribes and Pharisees had difficulty with Jesus relating to the tax collectors and other disreputable, they would be offended having a shepherd as the primary character of Jesus' story! Jesus chose this worker on the edge of society to be an illustration of God's persistent care and love..

### **Luke 15:1-10 The Parable of the Lost Sheep**

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

<sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup>'Which one of you, 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? <sup>5</sup>When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. <sup>6</sup>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." <sup>7</sup>Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

### **The Parable of the Lost Coin**

<sup>8</sup> 'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup>When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." <sup>10</sup>Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

This is the Word of the Lord

As the ferry was reaching the Island of Iona in Scotland, the passenger next to me said, “Anyone who comes here really wants to be here because it takes so much work!” That is so true. Just that day alone, we had had a 3-hour train ride from Glasgow. We lunched on the 45 min ferry ride to the Island of Mull and then an hour and half harrowing bus ride on a one lane road where we played chicken with other buses, cars, tractors and various livestock until finally we had a rocky 10 min ferry crossing to Iona.

As we landed on the Inner Hebrides Island, my longtime dream was met. Iona was a place I had always longed to visit. I wanted to know its long history beginning with St. Columba, who settled there around the 6<sup>th</sup> Century. I wanted to see those highland cows with the long bangs and I wanted to see some sheep.

My family and I spent six days on this island that was about five miles long and a mile wide. It is mostly a barren wildness and not a tree in sight. It even had a natural golf course that you had to share with the free ranging sheep and highland cattle. Iona is best known for being a retreat. Since the days when St Columba was expelled from Ireland. The Island has been a place apart. Columba used the island as a base to evangelize Scotland and Wales for Christ. The entire place felt ancient. In fact, the oldest rocks on the planet are found on its shores.

Iona is a sacred place. Prior to Columba and Christianity, it was a sacred spot for the Druids. The Abby that held an order of Benedictine Monks in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century was rebuilt in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century and in the process shows how Christianity can be transformed to meet the needs of the times. It is now an ecumenical Christian community dedicated to peace, justice and the earth’s care. This little out of the way island is now an inclusive community reaching far beyond its isolated shores.

Many things intrigued me about my time on that Island but today it is about the sheep. I never grew up around sheep but neither did the Pharisees, so watching these sheep on Iona helped me to appreciate what Jesus means about God’s persistent love.

Lesson #1: being a shepherd in Iona is not easy. I have seen sheep in rural areas in the US and other parts of Great Britain. I have heard farmers say that sheep are not the smartest of animals. I never thought caring for sheep was actually that hard. Most of the time sheep like to clump together. Whether they are herded by

a dog or all huddled under a tree, they seem to be in a contained space. That is not the case with Iona sheep. I cannot even imagine how you would round them up. With the craggy hills and the open fields, the sheep on Iona were everywhere. I never saw them clump! These island sheep seemed to be doing their own thing. They were not organized. We would hike and climb up the highest hill and when we got to the top, there was one sheep standing there looking at us! We went down to the rocky coast. One sheep who got there before we did. There were fences to be sure, but I think they were more suggestions rather than requirements.

In order to be a conscientious shepherd on Iona would involve a lot of fretting and care. Because I think it would be impossible to know where the sheep were at all times. When Jesus says that when a shepherd having a hundred sheep and losing one would go to great lengths to find that one. That is no small task. If I were a shepherd and had noncompliant sheep scattered around the windswept hills, I think I would be tempted to cut my losses and be glad for the ones who did make it home.

Jesus does not give us a pass of going halfway. Jesus is telling us that of course you will make the extra effort to reach that last sheep way up there on that high cliff. Because you see not only is God through Jesus the good shepherd who looks out for all the sheep. We are the shepherd taking care of God's sheep.

Quite frankly, the Christian Church, as the world perceives it, is not coming across very well. It appears exclusive and dogmatic. We do not come across as good and caring shepherds who are there for the sheep who do not fit it.

It is easy to shepherd those with one mind and forget about the others. Jesus is telling us to reach and stretch to the independent sheep like those on Iona.

Jesus is expecting us to make the extra effort and to find the sheep that does not compliantly come when first called. That makes things complicated. That makes us work a bit harder and to think out of our own comfort zone. All of the sheep are God's beloved.

Let's face it in our culture today compliant sheep is not the norm. People are not flocking (pun intended) to come to church. I have been reading the history of Oak Grove, it is a history of which to be proud. But we all know that being a church today is very different to the church that Gideon Pond envisioned. Being the church today is not the same as the church in the 1950s with 385 children in

the Sunday School. Being the church today is challenging stretching our shepherding skills of how to reach the ones who may need to hear God's message of love more than ever but do not know where to find it. We as a church must think about this space and decide how we feed others God's message of love to those who are searching and following after things that do not satisfy.

Lesson #2: I would suspect that most sheep may not realize that they are lost. As we were making the long trip back to the mainland on the Island of Mull, there was a field of, you guessed it, a flock of sheep! Most of the sheep were on the south end of the field but there was this one sheep sitting alone in the grass on the far north end. That sheep was far from the others but did not seem distressed. That sheep was totally unaware of the dangers that might happen from being separated from the others. That sheep was oblivious in realizing how vulnerable he might be. It got me thinking do those lost sheep actually know that they are lost? What about us? People who do not truly know the treacherous path they are on? . How many times in our own lives that we do not realize we are beloved by God? It is easy to forget; it is easy to dismiss when the cacophony of all the other claims assault us.

There is a yearning to belong to something that is life giving when we try to find it life taking ways? As a culture, we try to fill the yearnings with overworking, overreaching, overcompensating, overindulging. All are signs of not knowing our way.

There is a yearning for something more, but sometimes we follow the path away from God rather than toward God.

We turn to Christ to help us care for the sheep of the world. To care for the lost ones and the ones who might not know they are lost. It is a tall order. If I had to do it alone, I would make a terrible shepherd. There are way too many ways to lose sheep. There are the ones who are part of the fold then for an unknown reason simply wander away. How do they come back? There are others who really do not think they need to be found. If I were solely responsible for all those sheep out there, I would turn in my shepherd's crook and go home. I know the word Pastor comes from the shepherd imagery. The only reason that I take on that title is that I know I am not alone in this endeavor.

We have the church, we have each other, and we have the Spirit to lead and guide us into the nooks and crannies of life. We share that responsibility. We are

a cooperative shepherd in the form of Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, and our focus is not how we maintain but how we reach out and welcome in all the sheep in God's fold.

Jesus concludes his lesson with when that lost sheep is found, when that lost coin is retrieved, there is much rejoicing. There is joy. Not judgment or suspicion or justification that we have chosen rightly, but pure joy. We are to help each other not get distracted by trivial matters but to remind each other what is important. That there is joy in living a life knowing we are part of God's love and embrace. There is peace in knowing we do not have to go it alone. There is calm in realizing that God knows when we are lost even when we do not know it.

I probably did not have to go all the way to Iona Scotland to find out about sheep. I probably did not have to fly across the ocean, take a train then ferry then bus then ferry to discover the ways of sheep. My journey to get to Iona helps me to appreciate the extent that God will go, the depth the length and the breadth of God's love for us is far greater than whatever effort I experienced. God has not given up on us. Let us not give up on each other.

I bet the Pharisees did not like being taught a lesson that involved people like shepherds and animals like sheep. Jesus was not in the business of casting judgment as much and gathering people into God's embrace. Jesus certainly is not going to stop hanging with people because others thought they were unworthy. Thank God for that. Amen.