

**The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd**

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

September 11, 2016

*The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19), Luke 15:1-10*

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire. *Amen.*

Good morning!

I suspect most families have *their story* about the time one of their children became lost from the rest of their brood. For my family, the year was 1982(ish); the players were my mother, my grandmother, my two sisters, and I; and the scene was the Columbia, Louisiana, Arts & Crafts Festival along Highway 165, just outside of Monroe. Like most festivals of the sort, this Columbia affair dotted the roadside with tents and tables where vendors sold quilts, homemade jellies, and watercolors. Of that day, I remember the uninteresting wares blessedly interrupted by a man selling baseball cards that he had sorted into teams and bound neatly in Saran Wrap. In the odd way a particular memory can flash and linger, I can still vividly recall the baby-blue set of 1982 Fleer Atlanta Braves – with pitcher Al Hrabosky featured as the facing card – sitting atop the pile of Saran’d teams like a beacon in a sea of adolescent boredom.

On that day, my youngest sister, Emily, was that dangerous age between two and four-years-old, by which time she had achieved full and active mobility, yet without anything approaching full and active understanding of her environment (and, for the record, I will resist the big-brother comment that after all these years she’s *still* not achieved that appreciation). In any case, I suspect that it was Granny who bought her the duck on a stick.

Maybe you will remember these particular toys, which, for a season, were as ubiquitous at such fairs as clothespin-cocking rubber-band guns. See, there was a short, broom handle attached at its end near the tail feather of a two-dimensional wooden duck. The duck – its shape carved with a jigsaw from a 1” x 6” plank – was painted as a green-headed, mallard drake with a happy smile.

Now, here’s the kitsch: on each side of this duck was a thick, wooden wheel, to which flat, floppy pieces of black rubber cut in the shape of webbed foot had been stapled. Therefore, when one rolled the device (especially on a linoleum floor), the toy made the most satisfying smacking noise you’ve ever heard. Further, for the one pushing the duck, there was a nearly equally satisfying resistance felt through its handle. Indeed, pushing this duck, one could become lost in their play...

Now, today’s lesson from the Gospel of Luke immediately precedes the familiar story of the prodigal son – you know the one – which we will hear in a few weeks during our Stewardship season. In fact, that story of the prodigal will be introduced by the very same three verses introducing the two parables we heard today, those first bars of Chapter 15: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So he told them this parable...” (Luke 15:1-3).

Luke positions all three of these parables – the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son – as responses to the Pharisees’ and scribes’ grumbling about the sketchy company that Jesus keeps: he tells *them* these parables of welcoming what had been lost. Listening with this ear, the comment closing “The Lost Sheep” can read as tauntingly sarcastic to land his emphasis: “...there will be more joy in heaven over one [“sinner”] who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons [like all of you who “need no repentance”]...” (15:7).

Importantly, in all three of these vignettes (“The Prodigal Son,” included), Jesus invites the outcast to come near, and the stories serve as the flipside of the narrative we’ve been hearing for some weeks:

*not* of the weeping and gnashing of teeth and of those cast into the outer darkness;

*not* of the dividing of mothers from daughters, fathers from sons, in the coming judgment;

but of God’s discovery, reunion, and celebration at the welcome of the lost.

...Apparently my sister found especially compelling the *smack* of that duck’s floppy feet and the rhythmic thump reverberating through its handle, for, as my mother will still recount with little prompting, we were all right there – *right there!* – and getting ready to leave, when Emily vanished. As you can imagine, hysterics ensued. Not only did every person at the event transform into a predator hunting young, Allen children, more conspicuous now was the absence of a fence between the festival site and the road: the state highway was *so close*, and that duck was a lot more fun to run on the hard asphalt than on the soft grass. Screaming and crying, my mother set out in search of Mr. Johnny James (and when she tells the story, she will get excited in this moment, saying, “I told mama, ‘Mama, you stay with Morgan and Amanda, and I’m going to go find Mr. Johnny James,’ because our family knew Mr. Johnny James, and he was in charge of the event.”). My mother did find Mr. James (poor, Mr. James!); he made announcements over the loudspeaker system; and my mother called out, “Emily! Emily!”...

For the Pharisees, these three parables challenge their snobbery, for no longer could they assume themselves as God’s favorites: *Why this Jesus is welcoming the riff-raff! He calls on them in their ratty homes and eats at their meager tables, preferring their sad squalor to our well-earned splendor, the riches of the righteous...Does he not know who we are? Does he not realize who they are?!*

Combatting this entitlement, Jesus casts the scribes as the self-important, impatient sheep, tapping their watches while the shepherd goes off again after that...same...dadgum...lamb who’s been nothing but trouble since the day he was born. Jesus casts the Pharisees as the son who’s always done what he was supposed to do – walked the straight and narrow – and, yet resents that he’s been denied the fatted calf, the good wine, and the best party for his friends. It’s an unfairness that the teacher shows such a preference for the pitiful and the lost.

...Thanks be to God, there she was: clear on the far side of the festival, happily and obliviously pushing her duck: *smack – smack – smack...Likewise, I am confident all of us, too, have spent some time separated*

from our brood – as lost as a coin buried in the sofa – and, so, Jesus also tells these parables for us, too.

Perhaps the more challenging message implied by today’s parables concerns the stay-at-home sheep, those of us who *are* in church this Sunday. Of course, for some safely deposited coins, our sense of being “found” is as innocent as thumbing a new stack of trading cards. However, in other seasons of our life, our confidence in our own righteousness can precipitate a more *willful* drift toward entitlement. In *those* seasons, we behave as though we are the good sheep living near the Shepherd’s will, even while...slowly, but surely...we increasingly distance ourselves from the faithful flock, protecting this more distanced position with the Pharisaic self-righteousness witnessed in today’s stories. That is, we avoid the recognition or admission that we are lost, by acting under the assumption that wherever we are, God has followed...hear that again: *avoiding the recognition or admission that we are lost, by assuming that wherever we are, God has followed...*but, see, that’s not, actually, the way it works! We *can* lose our faithful focus, and we *can* harden our hearts, for we do not set the course for God, God sets the course *for us*...and, lest we want to find ourselves separated from our brood, we must continually make a humbler assessment of our standing and our striving.

Even while we celebrate today’s beginning of a new Program Year in our parish, we also remember the fifteenth anniversary of those terrible events on September 11, 2001...the heroism and sacrifice that followed...and the suffering that continues, even now. Every adult here can recount where they were that day, where they watched the news worsen on the television as the morning hours dripped into afternoon, and into evening. In our vulnerability as a nation, for a humble moment thereafter we moved toward one another in authentic and meaningful ways, and I believe that more than God *met* us there, God *led* us there...before the finger-pointing and the politicizing took hold.

In the years since and especially in this election season, the political remembrance of September 11, more often than not, only pushes the toy ducks of self-interests – *smack – smack – smack – smack – smack – smack* – making a pleasing sound, perhaps, but moving us further and further from any such holy and honest vulnerability as a nation. Though our culture pays tribute, we do so while trafficking in an *assumed* faithfulness...behaving as though where we have gone in these years since, God has followed...when, if we would more honestly assess the wellness of our hearts and souls – as brothers and sisters, and as a collective people – we would find that we have moved clear to the far side of the festival...far from church on Sunday...far from the brood of our God, in whose name we defend ourselves, both our actions and our inactions.

And, yet, *fear not*. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, with a humble faith we *can* acknowledge our fear and grief, our confusion and our uncertainty.

We who had become lost, may we realize we are **the remembered!**

we who had drifted wayward, may we know we are **the pursued!**

and, yes, like a mother scooping her young daughter and her wooden duck into her arms, we who have felt forsaken, may we always now ourselves to be **the loved.**

Instead of cursing, or shaming, or further alienating the outcast, the Good Shepherd receives us with joy, every season and every moment we return to follow God's good purposes for ourselves and for the world...over, and over, and over again...*welcomed...loved.*

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;  
*Amen.*