



Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19  
Rev. Jonathan Stepp  
September 15, 2019

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I wonder if might you recognize these lines from one of the great works of English literature? “Marley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. . . Old Marley was as dead as a doornail.” I know Lewis knows those lines, they’re from one of his favorite books of all time. They are of course, the opening lines of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens.

Last Sunday I finished by quoting the smart-aleck school boy who, when asked how we get into heaven, replied “we have to die” and I begin with that great turn of phrase – dead as a doornail – this Sunday because Jesus is continuing this theme in our readings today. He speaks of two lost items, a lost sheep and a lost coin, and what’s interesting about both those things is that when they are lost they are as good as dead. Domestic sheep, such as Jesus describes, really can’t survive in the wild without a shepherd to watch over them – if they don’t fall to their death they’re bound to be killed by a predator. Likewise, a lost piece of money might as well be a granite pebble as a disc of gold. If it’s lost it can’t be used to buy anything or earn any interest – it’s simply dead.

If we stop and think about this for a moment then we realize that God doesn’t have a very high opinion of our ability to save ourselves. Clearly the Shepherd and the Woman are metaphors for God in these parables. And the sheep – as good as dead – and the coin – as good as dead – are metaphors for all of us. Now, at this point, I might think to myself “well, since I’m not lost I’m not either one of those in the parable, I’m one of the 99 righteous who have no need of repentance.” If I think that then I have seriously missed Jesus’ sarcastic sense of humor. He’s really getting a dig in at the Pharisees and Scribes by that statement – they think they’re somehow morally superior in God’s eyes to the tax collectors and sinners but Jesus thinks we’re all in the same predicament: Pharisees and tax collectors, Scribes and sinners, all alike humanity is lost and as good as dead.

Until. Until that moment when the Shepherd leaves everything to go and search for us. Until that moment when the Woman leaves all that she has to go and search for us. That is an amazing and passionate love isn't it? I'll be honest with you – and maybe I'm a little bit lazy – but truthfully, I would accept a 1% rate of loss. Actually, in almost any endeavor in life I'd consider myself fairly fortunate to only lose 1% - for example, one percent of my socks in the dryer or one percent of my hair or one percent of my memory. I'll take those odds!

Of course, there is one area of life where even the loss of one percent would be unbearable – and I'm sure you feel the same. I couldn't bear to lose even one percent of Beth, Lewis, or Emily. And that's how we all feel about our families.

And there's a profound lesson for us about God, a lesson we need to hear, mark, learn, and inwardly digest (to quote a great Collect from the Prayer Book.) No one is dispensable to God. Everyone of us, and every part of everyone of us, is priceless to God and there are no ends of the earth and no depths of hell to which our Father heaven will not send his beloved Son – the Great Shepherd of the Sheep – to find us.

How will I know when I truly begun to inwardly digest this truth about God's passionate love for humanity? Here are three signs:

1. Having realized that I will have about as much luck saving myself as a lost coin will have in making its own way back to a woman's purse, I will stop beating myself up over past mistakes and present failures; and I will rejoice like the angels in heaven that when I could not rescue myself, She who loves me more than anything else in the world came to my rescue.

2. Having realized that the 99 righteous are a figment of my imagination, I will stop comparing myself to others to see if I'm better or worse than they are. I will turn my heart, mind, and soul from pointless competition and fix my eyes on the Great Shepherd who loves me more than I love myself.

3. And finally, having realized that we'd all be dead as a doornail without Jesus, I will allow the Holy Spirit to turn my heart with compassion towards those less fortunate than myself: the poor, the sick, the lonely, the outcast, and all those who are as lost as I am and who Jesus tells me are my brothers and sisters.

Amen.