

Luke 15:1-7 (*The Message*)

The Story of the Lost Sheep

15 ¹⁻³ By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, “He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.” Their grumbling triggered this story.

⁴⁻⁷ “Suppose one of you had a hundred sheep and lost one. Wouldn’t you leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the lost one until you found it? When found, you can be sure you would put it across your shoulders, rejoicing, and when you got home call in your friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Celebrate with me! I’ve found my lost sheep!’ Count on it—there’s more joy in heaven over one sinner’s rescued life than over ninety-nine good people in no need of rescue.

“The ‘C’ Word: Change”

We live in a culture that loves to accumulate STUFF, and loves to get rid of stuff, too. We can buy things to help us organize, or we can really go for simplified living and cast things off, de-clutter, avoid materialism and consumerism. This simplified lifestyle, very popular among some millennials, has helped to launch web-services like FREECYCLE, a grassroots, not-for-profit movement of people who are giving away (or getting) stuff for free in their neighborhood. It’s all about reusing and keeping good stuff out of landfills.

This concept has also spawned a group of people called “freegans.” They are dedicated to the idea that “one person’s trash is another’s treasure.” The freegan movement can be ideologically, economically, or ecologically motivated, but it is always pointed toward the recovery of what others have deemed worthless. A more technical definition states that “Freegans are people who employ alternative strategies for living based on limited participation in the conventional economy and minimal consumption of resources.” Freegans believe that our society is wasteful-- that our people throw away things that could be put to good use. Their guiding principle is to salvage what others have carelessly tossed away.

That all sounds very altruistic, but for some freegans, this means “dumpster diving” for food, clothing, or furniture. It could mean scouting out curbsides the evening before trash day. Freegans are in search of stuff to reuse and repurpose by giving new life to what would otherwise be rubbish. Some Freegans squat in vacant houses. Some of these squatter settlements have become places for persons on the margins. Those with no place to go can sleep, clean up, and eat in a Freegan house. For these outcasts, a Freegan Squat is a place of welcome in a world that might ignore or revile them. For their Freegan hosts, this is another way to turn the trash into a treasure -- of the human sort.

This notion of turning trash into treasure is challenging. Would I go dumpster diving? (My son would tell you that I have!) At supermarkets, food is often packaged and deemed non-perishable, but bears expiration dates that render it unsellable, and not even worthy of donating for charitable purposes. Is it unusable? While a can of soup salvaged from the dumpster might be unappetizing to me, it may be the only source of nourishment for someone else. How do we balance faithful stewardship of resources with needed regulation of the quality of food?

Yesterday, a friend of mine spent most of the day with a group gleaned in a field where the tomatoes had already been harvested. They gleaned 4,000 pounds of tomatoes! These “left-over” or “cast-off” tomatoes collected will be given away this week at their local food pantry and used in local soup kitchens. In a couple of weeks, potato fields will be gleaned, then apple orchards, and vast fields where pumpkins and squash have grown. With no volunteers to do the gleaned, these life-sustaining sources of nourishment would go to waste.

As we struggle to find our place in all of this, the Gospel of Luke offers us a trio of parables from the teachings of Jesus that ask us, “What is trash and what is treasure?” And who decides what is trash and what is treasure? Today we shared the first of those parables, about a shepherd and one lost sheep. But, before the parables begin we hear that *“a lot of people of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently.”* Jesus is calling forth and attracting those on the edges, the marginalized of his day, those who most needed to hear a message of hope and redemption,

and that upset those who are in power: *“The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, ‘He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.’”*

Could this be a way of turning the trash of the community into treasure? It seems that way, doesn't it? Jesus is dedicated to the pursuit of what appears undesirable and unusable in the form of human persons. Tax collectors and sinners in the first century Palestine were LOW on the social scale. Like a Freegan host in a squatter's mansion, Jesus opens the door to give nourishment, refreshment, rest and hope to those who would enter.

What about the shepherd missing one sheep out of a hundred? To this shepherd, every sheep matters, as does each person. The shepherd must find and care for the sheep, which are both livelihood and a gift from God. I believe Jesus was intentional about choosing sheep for this parable. You see, unlike many other animals, sheep do not often deliberately run away. They just wander off with their heads down, going from one green patch of grass to another, not even realizing that they are separated from the rest of the flock.

Some people are like this, too. They slowly wander further and further from safety and security, faith and grounding, positive role models and community support. Eventually they wake up to realize that they are lost, that life is empty, that their hearts are burdened and heavy, and there is no life-line in sight. And when we are even incapable of “pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps,” God is still searching for us, with the desire to save us from whatever pit we are in.

As we can hear in the subsequent parables, a single lost and found coin is cause for celebration. An immature young adult child going off to “live life to the fullest,” learning excruciating life lessons, is worthy of reconciling mercy, forgiveness, and lavish love upon return home. Those lessons are really at the heart of the Gospel which reminds us that Jesus was sent to redeem us, and will continue to search for us and work with us until we can finally see and feel that we are worth all the effort and exuberant celebration to God.

But these messages remind us that we often view others, or even view ourselves, as potentially unusable, disposable, and unredeemable. We hear

the clamor that some persons are unworthy of care, education, meaningful employment, and safe community. Yet Jesus is here to turn that on its head! In God’s eyes, no one is disposable!!

During an age when we routinely hear about who should be excluded from government, societal care, and even the church, the Word of God speaks to us clearly. God’s mercy and forgiveness, and God’s reconciling power prevail. No human person is trash; each human person is a treasure. We are all called to see and offer that to each other. Doing so, for many of us, requires CHANGE....yes, the “C” word! This may be the hardest part of following Christ. We must change our attitudes toward one another, and all others. Not one of God’s creations deserves to be treated as disposable!

So, what does that mean to us? Perhaps one person might need to reconcile with a rejected neighbor. Another may need to forgive a former friend -- no matter whose fault it was. It might mean choosing NOT to view someone with disdain if their politics, theology, or ideology are different from ours. It could mean that we choose NOT to be suspicious of the person sitting next to us, across the room, or around the corner because of differing attitudes. Ultimately this might mean that when we look in the mirror, we choose not to loathe the person who gazes back at us, or to face life’s changes with grace.

In God’s creation, no person is beyond repair, no person is to be thrown away. In Christ’s church, every person is to be welcomed, cherished, loved, and offered salvation through faith. In God’s created order, there is no human trash -- we are all treasure!

*Praise God for the Lord who loves; Praise God for the Lord who cares
In the midst of my weakness, When I am lost, Unable to find-Even myself
There is One who seeks, One who finds . . . **Me** . . . The lost
And rejoices in the correction of my folly.
‘Rejoices with the angels, Rejoices with song, Rejoices for me, and with me
Often before I am aware I was lost.
Rejoice and be glad, For that which was lost has been found. Amen.*

“The ‘C’ Word: CHANGE”
September 15, 2019 ~ 14th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Beckie Sweet