

NINETY-NINE = ONE

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:10-14, NIV

Ninety-nine = One. This is a common title for a sermon on the parable of the lost sheep. Ordinarily, when this sermon is preached, the focus is on the fact that certain people are lost, certain people are saved, and those who are lost need special effort, not only on the part of Christ himself, but also on the part of the church.

When you and I hear the term “lost” certain emotions come to mind. At some point in their lives, everybody has been lost, at least for a little while. Being lost is one of the most frightening experiences that people can have. Obviously, if you're a child, being lost is more frightening because you aren't sure what your options are—your whole security structure is gone.

I read an account recently about an adult who was lost in the woods of Northern Maine and eventually died. The evidence found by the searchers of his last few days showed that he had lost his mind with fear. Being lost is a universal, intense experience, and we can all identify with it. We feel cut off, alone, separated and endangered. However, it's not simply the one who is lost who has an experience of dread and terror—the one who is searching is also suffering, whether it's a parent, spouse or child. I think it's especially a terrifying experience for parents.

One of my most vivid memories from my early childhood is the time when my older brother George was lost on the beach at Coney Island. (I lived only a few blocks from the beach and we spent many summer days there.) The beach was very crowded as usual on a hot, sweltering, summer day. Naturally, my mother's (and most other parents') first fear about her lost child was that he might have drowned. This was intensified when George wasn't located quickly through the lost and found stations or the police. I can remember my mother (pregnant with my younger brother) running hysterically up and down the beach looking for George. I recall the sense of helplessness and panic on her face.

Today, of course, we have added fears about losing children, because kidnapping of children is on the increase. The statistics are terrible concerning the numbers of children who are kidnapped for pornography, for sale, etc. The minute a child is lost now, anyone who has the responsibility for the child knows an almost indescribable panic and fear.

Jesus understood that fear, and in using the images of lostness—the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son—he tapped into that universal dread. When he used these images, he was telling us something that we need to pay attention to, particularly in this passage.

First of all Jesus was saying that there are different kinds of lostness. A coin is not lost in the same way that a sheep is lost, and a sheep is not lost in the same way as a person. There is physical lostness—a person doesn't know where he is geographically. There is psychological lostness where a person feels totally alone, cut off and separated even in a crowd. He doesn't know people and he doesn't feel he has relationships with people. There's an emotional lostness.

There's a spiritual lostness, and sometimes there are all of these.

There are also degrees of being lost. Some people are more lost than others. When I was working at the

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center in New York City, my wife and I discovered one afternoon that our son wasn't standing with us. When we couldn't find him in the building, we sensed he was really lost. We finally caught up with him at the corner of Times Square. He was lost but not as lost as if he had been 30 or 40 blocks away. We were still within striking distance.

It is interesting when you compare the passage in Matthew with that in Luke, because Luke tells this parable in response to the Pharisees who asked him why he spent so much time with sinners—publicans, prostitutes and the outcasts of Jewish society—those who were totally outside of God's salvation.

The context is not the same in Matthew. If you read carefully around the passage, you will note that Jesus is talking about his kingdom and the people in it—the church. He is also describing the ways in which we're supposed to relate to each other in the church. When your brother sins against you, you're supposed to react in a certain way in the kingdom. The parable of the lost sheep is in the middle of all that discussion, which means that for Matthew, Jesus is here talking about church members who are lost, not people outside the church. In verse 10 of our Scripture Reading, it says, “See that you do not look down on one of these little ones.” The Greek word used here can mean “children,” but it's often translated differently, and “little ones” is probably the best literal translation. However, the term often refers to the immature, to the naive. Jesus is worried about people in the church who are not mature and who tend to get lost, who tend to wander off. When they wander off, they don't have the resources to come back by themselves.

When you think about the parable in these terms and the many ways in which people can be lost inside the church, some things begin to be clear. One of them is that when we talk about saving souls, we ought to have a much broader definition of what we mean. I try to remind people that there are many lost souls in the Sligo Church, in varying degrees. Some of them are as lost as the people outside the church.

When you talk about evangelism versus pastoral care, the temptation is to say that pastoral care has to do with taking care of the sheep who are in the fold, and evangelism has to do with taking care of the people who are not in the fold. The fact of the matter is that evangelism and pastoral care are both concerned about taking care of the sheep who are not in the fold as well as those within. I'm trying to make the point clearly that the tension that sometimes exists is a false one. Pastoring a church, even if you never reach out to a non-church member, is saving souls, is working for lost sheep. Together, Matthew and Luke give you the whole picture.

When you're in the church and you are lost, it's not as obvious, and it happens in different ways. There is a lostness which is not really a spiritual lostness, but a person who has been battered by life's blows—a loved one has died or some traumatic experience has occurred that has imposed suffering. Because the church does not surround that person as much as he needs to be, he may feel cut off from the flock. At that point, however, that person does not have a spiritual crisis. They are able to work their way through that.

In a spiritual crisis, the person may not know how to get help or behaves in such a way that he intends either to deceive the church about what is happening in his life, or alienate the church. For example, the people who are spiritually lost manifest that lostness in two basic ways: They either conform and

hide the truth about themselves, or they rebel and let everybody know the truth. In particular, the people who are conforming may deceive everyone except the Shepherd. In this kind of crisis where the relationship with God and the church is in question, it is a spiritual crisis. Salvation is at stake.

When you talk about conformity and rebellion, you're not talking about two different things. Psychologists tell us they're really the same. The person who conforms, who obeys, who does what they think their parents, the church and God expect of them, is underneath a kind of boiling caldron of rebellion, and there will come a time when it erupts. Conformists are rebels at heart. They just haven't gotten the nerve yet to rebel. Beneath their acquiescence is a deep hostility.

Similarly, there is a deep desire to conform found even in the individual who has thrown off all restraints, who wants to alienate everyone, and who wants everyone to know how bad he/she is. You see this particularly in the biblical stories of siblings, primarily brothers—Jacob and Esau, Cain and Abel, the older and younger brothers in the story of the Prodigal Son.

Consider Cain, who symbolizes to some extent the brother who always did what he was supposed to do. The brothers were asked to bring offerings to the Lord, but Cain's offering was rejected. Apparently, up until this point, Cain and God have gotten along just fine. Cain thought he understood what God wanted, and he did it. As long as that was the way it worked, everything was fine. When Cain's offering was rejected while Abel's was accepted, Cain became angry and killed his brother. The conformist had something underneath that finally came out. After he killed his brother, he ignores God's offer to help and lies. He breaks his relationship with his family and goes off into the wilderness alone, separated, a lost sheep. But he was already a lost sheep. It's just that nobody realized it.

He is typical of the lost sheep in the church—the person who grows up seeing that the acceptance of his parents and God depends on his being a good person. “They love me when I do what they want, and they don't love me when I don't do what they want.” When Cain's offering was rejected, he felt rejected as a *person*. For him, “I have failed,” means “I am a failure.” That's the conformist, legalistic, behavioral, external mentality. He can't be happy that his brother is successful. He can't be happy that God accepts his offering. His subconscious hostility explodes into anger and murder. As long as things are going well, Cain doesn't have a problem, but if he fails he has serious problems. God said to Cain, “Cain, your offering was not acceptable. Just go back and get another one. Cain, the offering wasn't acceptable, but *you* are!” It wasn't enough. Cain is locked into the idea that he must earn God's approval. “I've got to do it my way. I'm not going to accept what you have to say or what you want to give me. I want to give you a gift and I want you to take it, like it or not.”

The elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son is just like Cain. He's a rebel in conformist's clothing. People in this kind of situation have difficulty even accepting gifts. There is a compulsion to earn everything. “I want to merit everything.” Why? Because these people don't feel they're really worthy of love intrinsically. These people don't feel they're really accepted in and of themselves. They find it difficult to respond to love, and there are many people in the church like that.

On the other hand, the rebel is not trying to hide in the same way. He lets it all out. The rebel is antisocial and destructive, but the point is that he wants recognition. The assumption behind his actions is that “If I were normal, if I behaved the way the conformist behaves, nobody would pay any attention to me. I already feel like I have no value. One way to feel like I'm important, like I make an

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impact on people, is to behave in such a way that nobody can ignore me. Not my mother, not my father, not the church members, nobody.” This person is uncomfortable with success. He has a hard time experiencing forgiveness, but he has the same desire to hide as the conformist. He really has a hard time being related to people, being accepted and being loved for himself. He can't believe that he is worthy of love in himself. People like that suffer a long time before they realize how lonely and isolated they really are; they don't know how lost they are.

The shepherd goes after these sheep. He leaves the ninety and nine and goes out to find these sheep. When he finds them, he forgives them. He doesn't excuse them. He doesn't say that what they did wasn't so bad. No, he takes them seriously by saying “What you have done was terrible, what you have done hurts people. It has awful consequences but I am here to help you bear the burden of those consequences. And I am here to tell you that I love you in spite of everything; it makes no difference to my love. But it does make a great deal of difference to what happened and to other people.”

Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd and I will lay down my life for these sheep.” Not simply for the unconverted, the degraded or for the lower classes. He's talking about people in the church. He's talking about fifth generation Adventists, not just the first generation Adventists. He's talking about the educated as well as the ignorant.

At one time or another, everybody in this congregation is going to feel lost, if you haven't already. The pastoral staff knows only a fraction of what goes on in this church. The old adage, “The squeaking door finally gets oiled,” is true. The people who let us know what's happening or who know they need help and come to us, are the ones who get help. People who hide don't get the help they need. At least, not from us. They may from other people who are more in tune with their lives.

This is where it becomes apparent that we are all in one sense or another at different times, pastors or shepherds, helping the Great Shepherd. At other times we are like the lost sheep. Not necessarily awful sinners needing to be found by the Savior, not totally lost spiritually, but we are lost. We're bewildered, confused, suffering, and we need to be found.

Through other people, the Savior finds us. That phone call that tells us we're not forgotten, that note of warmth and love, that note of invitation to someone's house, that visit from a friend who comes in Christ's name, in all those encounters, the Shepherd is searching for his lost sheep.

Whether we conform and are good little boys and girls, whether we rebel, whether we are simply bloodied by life's relentless blows, the Shepherd is seeking and finding us and carrying us back to the fold.

Jesus ends our Scripture Reading by saying,

And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. (Matthew 18: 13, 14, NIV.)