

Luke 15:1-10

Are you part of the 99%, or are you that tiny 1%? A year ago when we watched the Occupy Wall Street mobs staging their protests against the so-called wealthy and privileged 1%, we may have felt that we did not belong to either group. We weren't that tiny fraction of society that is wealthy and privileged, but neither were we the grumblers and whiners who wanted something for nothing. We weren't the 99 or the 1. We could not relate to either group.

A few minutes ago we heard about two other groups. These groups of people are also the 99 and the 1. And we may not like to include ourselves in either one of these as well. The 99 sheep, says Jesus, are those righteous people who need no repentance. The one sheep who is lost, says Jesus, is the sinner who does repent.

It's not just a male ego thing; it's a sinful nature thing that no one wants to admit that they are lost. We see others who are lost sheep. We even feel sorry for them. But that's not us. We are not that sheep, that sinner who is lost. We know exactly where we are.

But if we are not the one lost sheep, that would put us with the 99, and from what Jesus says, that's not where we want to include ourselves either. He speaks this parable in response to the Pharisees and Scribes who grumbled that Jesus received sinners. The Scribes and Pharisees would not have placed themselves in the category of the one lost sheep. They were the grumbling and whining 99 percenters. They were those self-righteous egotists who thought they had no need of repentance.

If we put ourselves with the one, we are admitting that we are lost. But if we include ourselves with the 99, then we are admitting we are Pharisees who do not need to repent. So where do we fit in? Before we answer this question, we first need to look at the Shepherd of the sheep.

Every shepherd, every man who had sheep, would go out to find and reclaim a sheep that was lost. But no one would do, or could do, what Jesus did. To reclaim His lost sheep, Jesus entered our sin-darkened world, became one of us, and suffered and died for the sake of His sheep. To find and reclaim His sheep, Jesus had to go to hell and back. He had to ransom His sheep by suffering the punishment we deserve. We're not just sheep. We are sinful sheep who care more about what we want than what God wants for us. We may not be Wall Street occupiers, but we are Earth occupiers who whine and grumble against God because we think we deserve better. Yet if God gave us what we deserve, we would spend eternity in hell.

But Jesus came. He became the Sacrificial Lamb who endured what we all deserve. And this is the same Shepherd who so loves His sinful sheep that when one of them is lost, He seeks it until He finds it, and with joy He brings His lost sheep home again. Friend, if you are not that one lost sheep, then you are not with your Shepherd. Jesus leaves the 99 and goes out in search of the one...not because the one is more important than the 99, (He died for them, too), but because the 99 have no need of repentance, and if they have no need of repentance, they have no need of a Savior.

Jesus did not hang out with the Scribes and Pharisees. He hung out with the sinners--those who knew they were sinners and wanted to be helped. The 99 in Jesus' day had no use for Jesus. They were content within themselves. They were not lost in their opinion. They were righteous, good enough to stand before God on their own without a Savior pleading and dying for them.

The 99 today are the same as in Jesus' day. The 99 do not hang out with Jesus. They do not hunger and thirst for His Word and His Sacrament. They really do not feel the need to be with Jesus here in His House, here at His Table, or in His Word in their home.

This makes you, not the 99, but the one. You are that one lost sheep because you are one Jesus spends His time with. You are one He seeks with His words of Law and Gospel. You are one He rejoices over as He brings you here to His House to feast with Him at His meal of grace. You are the one lost sheep not because you repented of your sins once, but because you live a life of repentance. Anyone who sits in church confessing his sin, yet is unwilling to turn away from his sin, is not the one but the 99. To be a lost sheep that Jesus finds is to be repentant day after day. It is to fight against sin. It is to daily tell lust and jealousy, anger and greed, "You are not my master...Jesus is!"

To be the one sheep, and not the 99, is not to be without sin. It's not to be perfect. It's to remember that we are lost sheep; that daily we wander away from God; that we become lost again and again because we are weak and sinful. But it's also to be found again and again by Jesus. Your sins against God are no match for His love and mercy for you. Your wandering away from Him does not disqualify you from being His sheep. Rather, the more you sin, the more He forgives. The more you wander and become lost, the more He seeks you and finds you.

For some reason many people think that Jesus' sheep are always good and gentle, always in the Word, always in prayer, always living exemplary lives. This is what Jesus' sheep strive for, the we are always falling short. It's not the sheep who are so good and gentle...it's Jesus. It's not the sheep who are always in prayer as we should be...it's Jesus who is always in prayer for His sheep.

I think a better picture of Jesus' sheep is the one He draws for us. Jesus' sheep are sinners, and so are always becoming lost. And Jesus' sheep are being returned to the Father's House again and again because Jesus keeps going after them to find them and reclaim them. It's not the sheep who find Jesus. It's Jesus who finds His sheep. It's not the sheep who love Jesus so perfectly. It's Jesus who loves His sheep even to the point of dying for them.

I pray that I am not looking today at the 99 sheep who need no repentance, but rather, that I am looking at the one lost sheep when I look at each one of you...and when you look at me. I see children who have disobeyed their parents last week, becoming lost sheep. I see young people who have given in to the temptations of the flesh, becoming lost sheep. I see people of God who have acted like people of the world, becoming lost sheep. I see dear sheep for whom Christ died, who have wandered away from the Father's House, becoming lost sheep. Just so, you see your pastor who is as sinful as all of you, who is also a lost sheep.

But more than anything, I see sheep, lost and sinful, who are loved by Jesus. I see sheep who are forgiven by Jesus. And I see sheep who are found by Jesus again and again. Amen.