

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Des Moines, Iowa

September 15, 2019  
Jeremiah 4:11-22, 22-28; Luke 15:1-10

## **“We Seek to be Found”**

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

I know about lost and found. When I was moving from my second church in Indiana, to our third church in Waterloo, Iowa, my financial secretary in Indiana took the time, after the third day I was in Waterloo, to call the financial secretary in Waterloo. She said, “It is nice to meet you, and I just wanted you to know that Scott is a nice guy, and you will love working with him – but one thing – don’t ever give him the original copy of anything. [Laughter.] He would lose his head if it were not attached.” I’m not denying it. Since then, the first thing I said when I came here, I told everybody, “Don’t give me the original copy of anything. I’m really good at losing stuff.”

But it’s not quite what the passage is about. The passage is more serious. Not about things, but about people – of human beings. I have always really disliked that passage, not of the coin. I like that one, but the sheep. I think it’s because scholars have over-evaluated the passage. They have talked about when they go after the one and they leave the 99 in the wilderness. Just think of all of the wild animals, and all of the things, that would eat the 99. Why would the shepherds sacrifice 99 just to have one? And, frankly, I just think they over-evaluated a symbolic parable. Remember, parables are not historical truths. A parable is a story that illuminates a greater truth. There were not 99 sheep, and then the 100th sheep wandered off, and there was an actual shepherd. They were telling a story to make a point.

I don’t think the point was, if Jesus wanders off to find one, that the other 99 are going to get eaten. Somehow, I just don’t think that was the parable. And, to prove my point, when the woman goes to look for the coin, she didn’t leave the other coins outside the door, with a big sign that says, “Don’t Take My Money.” They were in the house safe and sound.

The story is about hunting until you find the person, or the item – not putting in danger somebody else. And, when Jesus was talking, the 99 were not going to be eaten or murdered, or anything else. The 99 were expected to take care of themselves while Jesus went and looked for the one.

The 99 were the religious establishments. They were the Pharisees. They were the scribes. They were the religious people who had already experienced God, who had already understood the 613 Levitical codes. They knew or should have known how to behave. They were the ones who God should have been able to trust to take care of things while Jesus went looking for the one who was lost. The problem was, far too often, the 99 (when the cat is away the mice can play) became immoral, inappropriate sometimes, when Jesus wasn’t right there watching making sure they were living faithfully.

Now, in my ministry, there have been a lot of times where I have had to face the lost – and I’m not talking about people who have passed away and we have lost them. No, they are found, they

are found in God's Heavenly Kingdom. God has fulfilled the resurrection in their being resurrected into God's Kingdom.

When I'm talking about the lost, I'm talking about those here on earth who feel lost and ignored by the 99. I believe it was the middle 1990s, maybe 1994, I had a couple of trips and I think it was the one in 1994, I went to Israel with a group of ministers. Woohoo! Boy, was that a party. [Laughter.] There were about 35-40 of us.

Three of us had the opportunity of being invited to St. Georges' Cathedral in east Jerusalem. The reason why that was so interesting and meaningful for me was that I had the opportunity to meet with a unique group of Christians. St. George's Cathedral is an Anglican Cathedral in east Jerusalem; and east Jerusalem, at that time – probably still is today – Palestinian. When you think of Palestinians, automatically you think of Muslims; but, there are a great number of Christian Palestinians. They met with us and talked to us about, "Why has the United States and its churches not heard our cry?"

Now, this was in 1994. This was seven and a half years before 9/11/01 and already they were saying, "We were a large [group of] people, but the Jewish community has hurt us, harassed us and kept us from being able to fulfill our business interests, and other things, and we have had to leave." In east Jerusalem we used to be a huge size of the population, and now we are less than one percent."

That was in 1994. They said the United States – and I thought it was interesting – they saw us as a Christian nation. Whether you agree with that language or not, that is how they viewed us and they said, "Now, in a Christian nation, why are you ignoring Christians and supporting Jewish people?" And, in that moment, I said, "I'm trying to understand where you are, and I don't want to impede that, but, I hope, that as people of faith, we don't look in choosing one over the another; but go ahead and tell me what you mean."

They said, "You turn a blind eye when we are being unjustly provided for – cared for – and yet, if we did that to the Jewish Community, you would come down on us like a ton of bricks. We are your brothers and sisters in the Christian Church. Where are you?"

And, I have been pondering that question, without enough wisdom, for the last 25 years. What are our roles and how do we seek to find the lost? And, they are lost. A member in a previous congregation, said to me, "Why are we bothering to feed the poor? Because, unless we care for their souls, most all of them are going to damnation anyway. Why are we bothering to feed them, because unless we feed their soul, they are going to hell? We are wasting our products. We are wasting our resources?"

Now, I had an answer for that gentleman, and that is: "You are acting like this world of ours is like a reality television show called 'Survivor' and that the earth is an episode of 'Survivor;' that if you can just survive and never stop saying 'Jesus, I choose you as my Lord and Savior.' Then you get to make it to the next episode and, if you make it all of the way to the end of the season, and you have not denied Jesus, you get to win the prize – and that prize is eternal salvation."

That is not how God looks at this world, And, the world we are living in right now is *not* a process of weeding out people, in order to find the good ones that can go to Heaven. We are living in the Resurrection. Jesus already died for our sins. We are living sacrificial joy in our lives right now. Now, that doesn't mean we don't have issues. It doesn't mean there isn't injustice. But, it means we are already forgiven. We don't have to worry about being kicked off the island. We are saved, and not by what we have done, and not by our choosing God, but by God's choosing us.

I had a person ask me some time ago – and it took me a time to get back to them – why don't we immerse? Why we do infant baptisms and not believer baptisms? My response was, because we, as Presbyterians, have never believed that we choose God. We do not have the capacity in our little minds of being able to understand the Divine, the Omnipotent, in any way, shape or form, enough to choose God. God can only choose us. That is why we don't do believer baptism. Believer baptism has the assumption that I choose my God. The only way you, or me, or anybody else can ever say, “thank you, God,” I believe, is because the Holy Spirit has already entered us,

God has called us. God called Weston to the font. Sure, Alex and Courtney brought him up here, but they had no choice in the matter. The Holy Spirit guided them up here. In the same way, we are called to, on behalf of God, reach out and find the lost; and, the lost are not those who are dammed. The lost are God's children who are unable to find joy in this life, grace in this life; because they are filled with pain and despair, because of prejudice, difficulty, disrespect and life in this world that is so tragic, that they are unable to even acknowledge the existence of a God.

That is what the Palestinians were trying to say to me that March day in 1994, at St. Georges Cathedral, I wonder if we were sitting down with the thousands of migrants, coming up from central South America and Mexico, who are fleeing, especially in El Salvador – they are our sister Church – fleeing abuse, fleeing with their children who are being violated by gangs.

It would be much easier to stay where they were, and just eek out an existence, than to put their lives and their children's lives at risk, walking hundreds – if not thousands – of miles through jungles in South America, just to walk into deserts, into central America and Mexico; knowing that along the way, there are people who want to take advantage of them, kill them and put their children into slavery and bondage.

They do it, not for even a better life, they are doing it because it is their only opportunity for life, and almost all of them are Christians, and I'm willing to bet that most of them would ask us the very same question my Palestine friends asked us, “We are brothers and sisters of the same faith. Why are you shutting your doors?” I'm sure they don't understand because they don't see us as Americans first, or perhaps they do, and that is the problem. They want to see us as brothers and sisters of the same Messiah and yet we have allowed them to remain lost.

That is why this isn't a political issue – and I'm sorry when it becomes one – but it is not. It is faith issue, because the lost are crying out to be found and we, the 99, aren't sure if we want to open our doors or not.

Meanwhile, Jesus is down there with the sheep, down with the coins – the valued ones – crying with them, nurturing them, giving them the strength to walk yet another day, hoping that the hands and feet of Christ and the other 99 will find them.

This isn't a passage about who gets into Heaven or not. We have already been resurrected. It is about: Will we, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and our Savior, pay attention, and seek and find the lost? And, if we do that, I believe that the Heavenly Hosts will applaud; that the Heavenly chorus will erupt in "Hallelujah," and we will experience the joy of the Gospel anew. I pray that the lost will be found.

Amen.