

Luke 15:1-7

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.'

Healing and Wholeness 6: The Wholeness We Await

This Parable of the Lost Sheep raises a few questions for me. Does it raise questions for you? One sheep in a hundred is lost somewhere, and the good shepherd leaves the 99 and goes and gets that one sheep. Jesus ends the parable by saying, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance." And the first question I have is, "Who is righteous?" And a question that goes right along with that one is, "What is righteousness?"

You know, I'm glad to have the upper Sunday School class with us today, because I want to make sure that you appreciate what it means to be 'righteous.' When you look at the word you see the root of the word is 'right,' and 'right' is a very big deal for us. Your report card is a measurement of how right you are in school; you take tests and write papers and answer questions, and if you study hard and you get most of the answers right, you get a good report card. But there is more to being "right" than answering questions correctly, isn't there? What if you're a straight-A student and you go around bragging about it; "I'm so much smarter than you; I can't believe little you know compared to me." That may be true, but is that person doing the "right" thing? No! We can get all the right answers in school, but that doesn't mean that we act "right" toward our neighbors. I may be the best soccer player on the field and make all the right moves and score all sorts of goals, but if I go around bragging and sticking my tongue out at other players, I'm not very "righteous," am I?

And you know what? It gets even more complicated than that. Your ideas about what is right do not stay the same. There are scientists who say that just as your body grows as you get older, so does your idea of what is right and what is wrong. So when you're a child you think that it's "alright" to do

something as long as you don't get caught, but later you'll realize that it's wrong regardless of whether or not you're caught. At one time you might think something is wrong because it's not "normal," but when you get older you may realize that what is "normal" is not right. Grown-ups teach you to follow rules and obey laws, right? But what if a rule is not fair to everyone? Is it "right" to obey the rule? I'm sure you've studied U.S. History, and you've learned that the United States would never have become a nation if people hadn't broken a lot of rules – like being loyal to the British government. But those people broke the rules because the rules weren't fair. We would say that those people were right to break laws that were wrong. There's even a point when what is right goes beyond being fair and being just; if someone says something that hurts you, you might consider it *fair* to say something to hurt them, but the "right" thing to do would be to forgive that person and not to "get even." That's not easy to do, and it takes time for us to "grow up" and to do "what is right" according to God.

And "right" is even more than that. Jesus tells the Parable of the Lost Sheep to these guys called Pharisees. They were guys who studied the law and interpreted the law and worked very hard to follow the law. In fact many of them believed that they were able to follow the law perfectly. They were good students of the law, and if you tested them on how well they were doing the law, they would have all gotten A's. And the Law that they were learning and obeying was not just any law. Certainly it was a GOOD LAW, and not just that. It came from God; it was given by God to Moses up on a mountaintop. And God had told Moses to tell the people to study the Law and obey the Law, so it made sense to the Pharisees that the best way for them to spend their time and live their lives would be to study this Law and to obey that Law. That would make them right with God, and there was nothing greater that anyone could do.

I think the Pharisees were mountain climbers in a way. Studying the Law was like training and exercising and learning all the tricks and getting all the equipment that they needed to climb the mountain. And once they learned the Law and understood the Law, they were ready to start climbing that mountain, and OBEYING the Law was the actual climbing. And the Pharisees trained so well and worked so hard that they were able to climb that mountain and get to the peak, the summit, and that made them feel really good about themselves. They were winners! They were high-achievers! And up on that mountain they were close to God.

But that made them wonder about Jesus, who was hanging out with all those sinners, all those people who were way down in the valley, who didn't even know how to climb a mountain, and they looked at Jesus and asked, "What are you doing way down there? We're up here on the mountain where YOU'RE supposed to be. Why are you hanging out with all of those LOSERS?"

And do you know how Jesus answered them? In a sense, Jesus said to the Pharisees, "I'm showing them how to climb the mountain." In a sense, Jesus said much more than that; Jesus said, "I'm showing them how to climb, and I'm coming with them." Have you ever had to give up an award because something more important had to be done? Maybe you were the best runner in your school, and you had to miss a track meet because you had a family emergency. Maybe you were the best speller in seventh grade, and you missed the spelling bee because you had to go with your family to a funeral. That's what Jesus does. Jesus is more righteous than anyone in the world, but instead of looking down from a mountaintop at everyone and saying, "Look at me! I'm up here! I made it! Aren't I something?" Jesus goes down the mountain to those who really need him. Jesus talks to the people who are afraid to climb mountains and says, "It's not so hard."

You know, I like to climb mountains – not really big mountains, but pretty big mountains, mountains that make take a whole day to climb. And sometimes I get to the top of a mountain, and I'm the only person up there. And do you know how that makes me feel? Lonely! I've worked really hard to get to the top, but after a little while I'm ready to come back down because I want to see my friends and my family. I think the Pharisees must have been very lonely people, working so hard to climb that mountain of righteousness, and getting to the top where they were all alone. Maybe they felt proud, but I don't think they were very happy.

And I think we can learn something very important from today's lesson. God is not hanging out on mountaintops with a bunch of "righteous" people. God is down in the valley with all the folks who have a hard time climbing mountains, because God cares about EVERYBODY. And there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one "loser" who decides to start climbing a mountain than there is for ninety-nine expert climbers who are hanging out at the top of the mountain. God goes after that one lost sheep, and every other lost sheep that can't find its way up the mountain.

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday. What does 'communion' mean? What word do you see in 'communion'? We see 'union' which means 'together.' It is God's desire that all people come together to Christ's table, to that place where we feel God's love and God's forgiveness. God wants us to

dine together with Jesus, the One who will come again to UNITE all the world into one single family, the family of God. As we wrap up this worship series on healing and wholeness we are reminded that Jesus is the great healer – the one who went around making the lame walk and the blind see, casting out demons. We are also reminded that we are only made WHOLE when all of us are able to climb the mountain; Jesus won't abide A SINGLE LOST SHEEP. We are one people, one flock, and we belong together. Our job is to help one another, not just to be solo climbers.

Finally, we are reminded that Jesus made the greatest sacrifice possible so that we could all get up that mountain. Jesus died for all of our sins. When he sat at that table, he took bread, gave thanks, BROKE IT, and gave it to his disciples saying, "Take eat. This is my body BROKEN FOR YOU." Jesus was broken for us, and as long as we are fighting with one another and arguing with one another and lying about one another and look down on one another, JESUS REMAINS BROKEN for us. Therefore it is our responsibility to help one another, to seek the lost sheep, to bring them back into the fold, and to lead them in ways that are pleasing to God. Then and only then will we be whole in the real sense of the word.