

**How Do You Feel—Being One of the Ninety-Nine? [Scott Kinder-Pyle]**  
**Luke 15:1—10**

They say there's safety in numbers, but I wonder if ninety-nine will be enough. I wonder if ninety-nine sheep, keeping their heads down in the wilderness, is going to be enough. What do you think? When our kids were growing up and in the mode of receiving a bed-time story, we had been given a collection of Jesus' parables—and I was shocked to see how the editors actually changed the way Jesus lines out the imagery. That is, instead of what Luke 15 actually represents about the shepherd leaving the ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness and going after that one stray, this Children's Bible described how the shepherd took the time to corral the ninety-nine safely in a pen and how he closed and locked the gate before going after the one that got away. And, of course, I understand what they were trying to do; the editors were trying to protect the average toddler from becoming stressed. They're concerned about their feelings. But I wonder why for us adults Jesus chose *NOT* to child-proof this parable.

So, let's say for the sake of argument that you and I are more like sheep than the shepherd. And if we're sheep, we instinctively know who we are because we're grazing alongside those who are like us. Sheep are notorious for sticking with the herd and for *being* herded by the shepherds who care about them; and yet, why the shepherds care about these domesticated animals is they're *worth* something. Sheep produce wool, and wool's useful for clothing. Moreover, when it comes time to slaughter, a leg of lamb makes a delectable meal. And so, I hope you don't mind that I've invited you to imagine being sheep—because the fact is—nearly every shepherd who has ever cared for the viability of the sheep does it because it's just good business.

It's nothing personal. It's economics. It's cost analysis. And like the sheep from the time of Jesus until now, you and I may find ourselves enmeshed in this same network of buying and selling. I looked it up on *Google* and the Artificial Intelligence robot said that when the typical human body is reduced to its basic chemicals, it's worth about \$160. So, that's something. But how do FEEL knowing that's what you're worth? Then, of course, if we multiply that figure by 99, the total value would be \$15,840, which is nothing to sneeze at. But I wonder, don't you?

***“So [Jesus] 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?’”***

Today's gospel reading offers an alternative. You and I don't have to go around judging ourselves based upon some kind of market-value. We don't have to calculate our worth according to how productive we are on any given Sunday. On the contrary, there may be a shepherd out there who is willing to risk the safety and the security of ninety-nine sheep and go after that one—the one that got away, the one who wouldn't stick with the herd. So how do you feel?

My own emotions are sort of mixed. That is—I want to experience the JOY that Jesus mentions in Luke 15, verses five, six, seven—and then again, with the woman who sweeps her house and finds her lost coin, in verse nine. And I'm especially intrigued by the ***“joy in the presence of the angels of God...”*** But, to be perfectly honest, if the shepherd's abandoned the whole flock for the sake of one stray sheep, who should have known better, I feel a little vulnerable; and I guess I resent the lack of attention.

From 1996 through 2006, my spouse and I served as co-organizing pastors of a new church development; and we were amazed as that congregation began with ten lost souls and eventually grew to over two-hundred. The Presbytery owned property, and by 2003, we completed a building worth \$1.7 million. But then something shifted. Everyone seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. We made it. We moved into a building; and we felt safe and secure. We arrived. And that's when I was invited to go to India; and so I went. And during my travels there, I met a pastor, named Matthias Subba, who was so incredibly joyful, I'll never forget the way he interlocked his fingers as he held my hand. Christians, in that country, were (and are) an extreme minority. And as we walked down the street, with Hindu shrines to our right and Muslim mosques to our left; we met friendly Sikhs with their heads wrapped in turbans and Buddhist monks in their orange robes... But here's the dynamic that I'd like to call to your attention. As much as I experienced the JOY of being in mission there, when I returned to so-called Christian America, where the President was telling us to buy more Christmas presents to boost the economy, and when I came back to the church we had helped start, the vast majority of people were shooting little arrows at me with their eyes; and the message that hit me square in the forehead was, *'Where have you been? Don't you care? What are we paying you for... if not to care for us?'* And we actually had one elder tell me how the church suffers and seems listless when you're not here.

So go figure:

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

And why? Well, because everyday and every night, the Spirit of God is conducting a search party. And every day and every night—it may not seem worth it—one in a hundred is found—one in ten is saved. And every day and every night—EVERY CHURCH on the face of the earth has a choice to make. Howard Clinebell, the author of *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, once told the story of a dangerous seacoast and “a crude lifesaving station.”

The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought of themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved... [and] the little lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided... Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely, because they used it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work... About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought boatloads of cold, wet and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick and some of them had black skin and some had yellow skin. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of the shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside [*Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling*: 13-14].

Now, take that story for what it's worth—but I think it's worth a lot. Stories like this, and parables like the ones told by Jesus, are not intended to make us feel guilty. This is no guilt-trip. No where in Luke, chapter 15, do we see Jesus wagging his finger at the Pharisees and scribes; nor do I believe he's wagging his finger at us. But what he's doing—what he's imagining—is a radically different way of experiencing JOY. And wouldn't we like to imagine it with him?

Verse 10: ***“Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents...”*** And so, imagine that! Is this JOY just for the angels? Or might a scraggly sheep, one of the ninety-nine, get in on the action? Might you and I? A key word that might help is “wilderness.”

*Wilderness* in the Bible typically refers to all that is beyond the reach of the Empire—all that’s outside of the market economy. It’s the place from which, in Jeremiah 4:11, “*a hot wind*” blows upon God’s own “*poor people*”—and it’s where (if we read a little further in Jeremiah 4:23) the earth may suffer in “*waste and void.*” Wilderness is where Jesus encounters Satan; it’s where the Israelites wander for forty years after their exodus from Egypt—and where the shepherds in the fields first hear of the birth of Jesus, not in some throne room, not on *Truth Social*, but beneath a darkening sky and on a vast, desolate plain. In other words, it’s that place where we feel the most vulnerable and at risk. And yet, NEVERTHELESS, the way through the wilderness is the way toward the JOY of the angels in the presence of God.

I don’t know if anyone here is a fan of Billy Joel, but early in his career, he sang a song that sort of troubled me. It’s called *Only the Good Die Young*, and the lyric always stuck me like a thorn went like this: “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints; the sinners are much more fun—only the good die young.” And I suppose I get it. The singer’s trying to coax this young woman, Virginia, to lose her religious inhibitions—to stop hiding her true feelings behind her Catholic rituals. But here’s how today’s parable might penetrate that veneer or that facade. What if the saints were those who cried WITH sinners all the way to JOYOUS LAUGHTER?

Tony Campolo was invited to a speaking engagement in Honolulu; and after flying all the way from the east coast, he can’t sleep: It’s three in the morning, and so, walking to a greasy-spoon diner on a lonely highway, he sits at the counter, is greeted by a heavy-set man behind this long counter and orders a cup of black coffee and donut.

Just then, about ten or eleven scantily-dressed ladies of the evening enter, and sit down on either side of Campolo who teaches sociology at a university and preaches at mid-size church in Philadelphia. They're obviously prostitutes, and Tony tries to make himself invisible. But it's hard because they're talking around him as he nibbles on his donut. Then, the one closest to him on the right announces, "Tomorrow's my birthday... I'll be 39."

The one on the other side then smirks and replies, "So what do you want from me Agnes—a birthday party? A cake with candles?"

Agnes answers, "Come on. I don't want anything from you. I'm just saying, it's my birthday tomorrow... That's all." And then, with a brief sigh, she added, "Are you kidding? I've never had a birthday party in my life!"

Well, that did it. After all the prostitutes leave, Campolo asks the heavy-set host, a guy named Harry, if the ladies came to the diner every night; and they did—every night, or early morning at the same time. "Why do you wanna know?" says Harry.

"So what do you say, we throw Agnes a birthday party?"

"Mister, that the best idea I've heard around here in a long time." And then he invited Kay, the cook in the kitchen, to get in on the action. They baked a cake. Tony bought and hung cray-paper decorations. They hung a sign behind the counter that said, *Happy Birthday Agnes!*

And the next day, by three in the morning, word had spread so far and wide, the little diner was packed with prostitutes from all over Honolulu. Then, like clockwork, with her colorful colleagues, Agnes arrives; and on cue, everyone in the diner yells “Happy Birthday.” Agnes is stunned; her knees buckle... “Come on, Agnes,” says Harry, “blow out the candles.” But she can’t. So Harry did. And then he says, “Cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake.”

And convulsing with tears, she asks, “Is it okay if I don’t cut the cake yet? My Mom lives two blocks away, and I like to give her some of this, but I’ll be back.”

And according to Tony Campolo, she did come back. And at close to four in the morning, a bunch of prostitutes laughed like they had never laughed. And Tony said, he invited everyone to pray; and they all prayed—and maybe a few angels licked the icing of the birthday cake off their lips. And maybe they had a party in the presence of God.

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