

SERMON: Joy in Heaven

TEXT: Luke 15:1-10

I grew up watching the sci-fi TV series, Star Trek. Since then, it's become a huge franchise of movies and spin-off shows, so I'm sure you've at least heard of it.

I wouldn't go so far as to call myself a Trekkie, but I was especially excited when they started making full-length movies in the 1980's. Probably the most popular of those was, *The Wrath of Khan*. Now, I'm going to tell you what happens, but if you haven't seen it, I can't help you. The statute of limitations on spoiler alerts is certainly less than thirty years!

Near the end of the movie, their ship, called the Enterprise, is in imminent danger of destruction. Spock, who is half human and half Vulcan, and who is unable to feel human emotion, enters a highly radioactive chamber to fix the ship's drive so the crew can escape an explosion that is moments away. With labored, dying breaths, he speaks to his colleague, James Kirk. "Don't grieve, Admiral. It is logical. The needs of the many outweigh. . . ." Then Kirk finishes for him, "The needs of the few." Spock replies, "Or the one."

Spock has sacrificed his life for the lives of his friends and fellow crew members. Indeed, his act fits perfectly within his prized philosophy of logic. “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the one.”

Normally, I would close a Star Trek story by singing the theme song in my best melodramatic and operatic voice, but it has the potential to intimidate our fine choral scholars, so I shall refrain!

Spock’s logic in this case makes good sense to us and to people all over the world. Any person who serves in the military forces of any country also operate by this philosophy. Not to mention police and fire fighters and first responders whose sacrifices we remembered and honored earlier this week, on September 11th. Such bravery and selflessness is both inspiring and heartbreaking, and they deserve our eternal gratitude.

So, if you think about it, the story Jesus told – suggesting that any decent shepherd would easily leave his flock of 99 sheep to go after one that is lost – is rather backwards. If that shepherd were a rancher today, such a practice would be a foolish financial move for his business. To risk losing 99 to save just one goes entirely against the idea of “cutting your losses.”

Jesus, however, tells the story in a way that assumes that everybody understands it. He even begins it with a rhetorical question; he doesn't need them to answer because the answer will undoubtedly be the same for every person who is listening.

"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.*"

Jesus is directing this parable at those grumblers in the crowd, the Scribes and Pharisees who have a problem with Jesus welcoming and befriending the tax collectors and sinners. But Jesus wants to make the point that these *sinners* belong to the flock just as much as anyone else. The only difference is that they are lost. They've wandered away from the flock, and maybe didn't even realize it until they looked around and discovered they were all alone.

The shepherd loves that one lost sheep just as much as the other 99. Good business and sound financial practices have nothing to do with it. No one should be left behind.

It's the same way with soldiers in battle, I understand. You never want to leave a fellow soldier behind.

In fact, this reminds me of another movie, *Saving Private Ryan*. It is set in World War II, and Private James Ryan is the last remaining of four brothers that were fighting overseas. A typist in the secretarial pool discovers that she has typed three letters to Ryan's mother, to inform her that her other three sons died in combat. She brings it to the attention of her superiors, who decide that this poor woman must not lose all four sons to this brutal war. Captain John Miller, played by Tom Hanks, is given the task of taking his men behind enemy lines to find Private Ryan and get him out alive. If I remember correctly, every man in that unit dies while saving Private Ryan.

Imagine the rejoicing of his mother when her son returns home. Like the shepherd, when he has found the lost sheep, 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.”

Jesus continues, “Just so, I tell you, there will be more JOY IN HEAVEN over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.”

As many times as I have read and preached on this parable, I guess I never imagined how God feels when someone who was lost is found. Like any parent, I’m sure, when a child is lost, God is devastated; and when that lost child is found, there is indescribable JOY IN HEAVEN.

I do imagine that the church represents the 99 righteous persons. While we *certainly do need repentance*, sometimes, I’m afraid, we think we don’t. We are the arrogant and grumbling Scribes and Pharisees who look down our noses at those tax collectors and sinners. We frown upon Jesus for keeping company with them or even giving them the time of day. And I believe that what Jesus is really saying in between the lines of the story of the lost sheep and the lost coin, is “Who are you to tell God that any one of his children is less valuable than another?”

Our arrogance as the righteous 99 is especially surprising considering that every one of us, I believe, has been that lost sheep at one time or another in our lives. Maybe you're feeling lost right now, and you're looking to be found, you're hoping to be accepted, you're praying to be valued and loved.

The hymn that we will sing in a few moments is one that I heard for the first time last year at the Montreat Worship and Music Conference. It was during worship, and the focus of the sermon was on this passage. Then we began to sing, and when we got to the part that asks the question, my eyes filled with tears. "Am I that treasured coin worth searching for? Am I that treasured sheep worth dying for? Am I that treasured child worth waiting for?"

Deep inside, those questions pierced my heart, and I realized that I have been – and continue to be, in many ways – that lost coin, that lost sheep, that lost child. I live a good life, a privileged life. So, if I'm still feeling lost at times, I can only imagine how others are feeling. Those *sinner and tax collectors*, the drug addicts, the mentally ill, the underprivileged, the homeless, the outcast, the foreigner.

Perhaps it is not they who need repentance at all, but the comfortable, the arrogant, the *self*-righteous 99. Perhaps if we were to repent, and then work to find, to welcome, to love, and to save the lost ones, that is what will cause JOY IN HEAVEN.

After all, that is why God sent Jesus. To find, to welcome, to love, and to save us. May we answer the call to continue his work... to the glory of God!

AMEN.