

Pentecost XVI

'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Luke 15:4

Those of you who have been around for a while know about my love/hate relationship with the sheep stories and sheep metaphors in the New Testament. Part of my reaction has to do with how we think of sheep: as dumb, clueless, aimless animals, cute, perhaps, but feckless. Not animals I would choose to be compared to, or to compare a congregation to, and that's how the image has often been used.

Jesus uses parables and figures to get the attention of his listeners so that he can make a point. And let's face it, we aren't the same audience he was addressing 2000 years ago. His examples have different meanings now, or maybe don't mean much to us at all. And commentaries on the parables, certainly older commentaries, would try very hard to match the parable up point by point with Jesus' punchline, and often that approach doesn't work.

Take today's Gospel. Doubtless, Jesus' audience would relate to the story of a shepherd losing one of his precious flock, part of his livelihood. And anyone – any of us even today, know what it's like to look for lost money – that check we threw in the trash by mistake, the \$20.00 bill that went missing. But remember the end of the reading: *Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*

Sheep don't repent – not that I know of – and coins don't repent. The *point of resemblance*, then, is the joy when something lost has been found. But the *point of the teaching* seems to have to do with agency, with the conversion of the sinner, with humility and remorse and turning toward the light. That's the heart of the Gospel, and we are in danger of missing it – in fact, we may *want* to miss it, because it's hard.

Contemplating repentance is harder than contemplating wayward sheep. And the undertaking of personal repentance is harder, generally, than chasing after someone or something else – a sheep, a coin, a parishioner who has gone away unhappy. *Finding ourselves* and putting ourselves on the path to righteousness is often more demanding than distracting ourselves with searches for what else might have gone astray.

However, having said all this, I want to return to the question of sheep, and tell a couple of sheep stories. I said last week that I'd done a lot of wonderful reading on my vacation, and one of the books was called **From the Holy Mountain: A Journey Among the Christians of the Middle East**. The author is a Scottish travel-writer and

devout Catholic named William Dalrymple, whose work I first encountered in a book about Delhi, India. In 1994 Dalrymple undertook a pilgrimage through the Middle East, following the route of a Sixth Century monk, another travel writer named John Moschos who wrote a collection called **The Spiritual Meadow**. Dalrymple journeyed through Greece, Turkey Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt, searching out the monasteries, shrines, and other sites that Moschos had visited and written about.

Here is what he found in an Eastern Orthodox convent in Syria, Seidnaya – Our Lady.

Toward the end of the service, the priest reappeared with a golden stole over his cassock and circled the length of the church with his thurible, gently and almost apologetically stepping over the prostrate Muslims blocking his way, treading as carefully as if they were precious Iznik vases. While I had seen Muslims and Christians praying together on the island of Buyuk Ada, off Istanbul, this was something quite different: a degree of tolerance– in both congregations– unimaginable today almost anywhere else in the Near East. Yet it was, of course, the old way: the Eastern Christians and the Muslims have lived side by side for nearly one and an half millennia, and have only been able to do so due to a degree of mutual tolerance and shared customs unimaginable in the solidly Christian West. ...

I asked (Sister Tecla) if the number of Muslims in the congregation was unusual. ‘The Muslims come because they want babies,’ said the nun simply. ... ‘They come in the evening... They make vows and then the women spend the night. They sleep on a blanket in front of the holy icon of Our Lady painted by St. Luke. Sometimes the women eat the wick of a lamp that has burned in front of the image, or may drink the holy oil. Then in the morning they drink from the spring in the courtyard. Nine months later they have babies. ... One Muslim woman was so desperate she ate the wicks of nearly twenty lamps. ‘

‘What happened?’

‘She came back the following year,’ said Sister Tecla, ‘with triplets.’ ...

In the guest rooms Sister Tecla sat opposite me while I ate, and I asked her about an unexpected photograph which was framed on the wall beside my table.

‘These are our Syrian cosmonauts,’ she said, pointing to a picture of three men in space suits clutching their helmets under their arms rather as stage ghosts hold their heads. ‘They spent a month together on the Soviet space station Mir.’

‘But why is the picture here?’ I asked.

‘It was given to us by the cosmonauts after they returned to Syria. ‘

‘They came here?’

‘Of course. All three are Muslims, but they visited Seidnaya before they left, to pray for good luck. As soon as they had returned safely they came here again. ‘

‘To tell the nuns about their adventures?’

‘No, no, aid Sister Tecla, looking at me as one might at a rather dim ten-year-old. ‘They came to thank the Virgin and give us presents: this picture and a sheep. ‘

‘A sheep?’

‘ A sheep.’

‘As... a pet?’

‘No, no,’ said Sister Tecla, frowning again. ‘ The cosmonauts came here to cut the sheep’s throat, of course.’ She gave me another withering look. ‘ It was a sacrifice to the Virgin,’ she said, ‘to thank her for their safe return from outer space.’

In Aleppo, Dalrymple visited the tomb of a Muslim saint, Nebi Uri, and talked with the Sheikh who minded the shrine.

‘Nebi Uri ... is revered by many Christians also,’(said the Sheikh.) ‘He is in your Bible as well as our Koran, I think. He was the leader of the Prophet David’s army. David had him killed so he could marry Nebi Uris’s beautiful wife.’

‘Yes, (said Dalrymple) ‘I think we Christians know Nebi Uri as Uriah the Hittite.’

It was an unlikely tangle of tales (Dalrymple muses): a medieval Muslim saint buried in a much old Byzantine tomb tower confused with the Biblical and Koranic Uriah. ... So the roots of Islamic mysticism and Sufisim lie with the Byzantine holy men and desert fathers who preceded them across the Near East.

‘ Very many Christians still come here, ‘ continued the Sheikh, breaking into my thoughts. ‘Mainly they are sick people who want to come and get healing. We had one Christian girl last week. She was sick for many months – her head was bad– and Nebi Uri appeared to her in a dream. So she came here and spent the night on the tomb. The next day she was healed. Last Friday she returned with a sheep, all covered with flowers and ribbons and with its horns dyed with henna. After prayers they cut its throat. Then they cooked it and everyone ate it.

‘Does this happen often?’

‘Every week.’

“Before they come... they will always have promised such-and-such an animal to Nebi Uri if he performs some favour for them. So when he does what they want they must fulfill their promise.

‘We believe that if they give a different – or less good- animal or do not come at al, then Nebi Uri will punish them, ‘ said the Sheikh.

‘How?’

‘The punishment can take many forms. He can give an illness or cause a *djinn* to take possession of the person. There are many forms of misfortune he can visit on the man who breaks his vow....

‘If a saint rejects a dead man (because he has not honored his vow) it is the worst thing that can happen. We regard that as a very great insult to the honor of the family.

‘But if a man is generous and gives a good sheep to fulfil his vow,’ said the Sheikh, ‘then we believe that that person will ride that sheep at the Day of Judgement. The sheep will carry him into Paradise. ‘

‘And the Christians believe this too?’

“There is no difference between ourselves and the Christians on this matter, ‘ said the Sheikh, ‘except that sometimes the Christians will make the sign of the cross over the forehead of the person whom they want Nebi Uri to cure.’

So, two stories involving sheep, stories that ring very quaint and curious, if not bizarre, in our Western ears in 2007. But the notion of sacrificing sheep would not have been strange or foreign to Jesus of course, at all. The Muslim practices recounted in both these tales would have been most familiar to him.

But to me the punchline of both these stories, the point of the parables, is how, in these isolated, apparently primitive sites of worship, a spiritual wisdom prevails that we, in our Western modernity, have forgotten or never knew or simply can’t believe. That is: there are many faces of God, there are many paths to God, and those faces, those paths, do not need to divide humanity. And surely, God’s purpose is not to divide us but to join us together in hope, in healing, and in thanksgiving.

At the 9/11 commemoration this week Governor Patrick called the terrorist attacks “a failure of human understanding.” Of course he has been attacked and vilified on the talk shows, accused of taking ‘the low road.’ But what else are all these acts of violence, anger, and desperation, but a profound and deadly failure of understanding? The failure of humanity to grasp that we are all in this together, this life, this history, this world?

The odd and superstitious and apparently backward characters who populate Dalrymple’s stories as I’ve told them – those characters seem to share a profound understanding: that more unites than divides us, that we call on the same God to heal and save us all.

Our own failure to understand, surely, is what we are most deeply called to repent. And what *joy there will be in the presence of the angels of God* when we can respond to that call with humility, and gratitude, and thanksgiving. Amen.