

Theme: Leaving the ninety-nine

Readings: Matthew 18:12-14, Luke 14:15 - 24

Have you noticed how illogical the Gospel is? So often Jesus takes the things we value and turns them on their head? It has to be a good thing but it is often hard for our human brains to cope with.

Sometimes we are so afraid of getting things wrong with people that we don't try at all. A woman opened a new business and her friend sent her flowers to mark the occasion. When the friend dropped in a couple of days later he was gutted to see the card on the flowers said "Rest in Peace." So he quickly called the florist to complain. "Well," the florist said "It gets worse. Somewhere in this city is an arrangement in a cemetery that reads 'Congratulations on your new location.' " Okay, the florist mucked up the friend's attempt to reach out and encourage someone but never the less, the new business owner did know that someone cared about her and wanted to encourage her new venture.

We could stay safe or we could make attempts, some of which are bound to fail, at encouraging others and showing that we care enough. Especially that we care enough to share with them as they journey towards Jesus.

Jesus' parable about the lost sheep is often applied to evangelism and fair enough I suppose. It does have some application. People say it was talking about Jesus or others who leave the secure ones to go out into the world to evangelise. The 99 safe ones you could say are the ones that know Christ.

But that is not actually what the story says. The man owns the 100 sheep. One of them wanders away. The 100 are safe and one of them wanders off. Presumably that meant the one had been safe too but chose to leave the safe place for some reason or other.

It ought to be a priority for us, not just to share our faith with those who don't yet know Christ, but also to follow up those who do. The sheep who are struggling, the baby sheep, those who may be unwell or are not thriving for some reason, those sheep need our care and attention. So much so that we might have to leave the healthy ones to care for them.

Jesus is not willing that any one of these little ones should be lost. Who can you think of who might be in this category? Perhaps it is you yourself. Who needs special attention and care? How can we provide it? How can we help each other grow in faith and maturity towards Christ?

Let's also think about Jesus' second story; the great banquet. This story is the result of a smug comment from one already sharing a meal with him. In effect the guy is saying "Isn't it great that we are part of the in crowd? We have a share in the Kingdom of God." He was referring to the great banquet, the feast which will happen at the end of the age; the feast the Messiah will host.

Isaiah 25:6 – 9

6 On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

7 And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;

8 he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.

9 It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Isaiah describes the end of the age where the Lord is setting a table for all people – a table of sumptuous food laid for all who will come. Notice at the same time the Lord will destroy all gloom and death, wipe away tears and shame will be no more. This is an amazing picture of abundant life for those who have struggled in this life.

Jesus fellow diner refers to this passage but his view of the feast is clearly limited. He has a narrow picture of the Kingdom of God. In his mind it is only for those who are deemed worthy – that includes himself of course.

One thing that always gets up Jesus' nose is smugness.

His response is to turn the established view of that future celebration on its head. Jesus began to turn the tables back in Luke 13. There he talks about people from all over the place; from East, West, North and South, eating at the same table as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the prophets. Even more daringly Jesus tells them the first will be last and vice versa.

So when time, as we know it finishes, there are going to be some surprises.

Just imagine for a moment that you have invited people to your house for dinner. You are in the kitchen doing the last minute things. The guests are in the living area enjoying conversation together. You come from the kitchen and say "Dinner is served, come and take your seats everyone." To your absolute amazement they begin to make excuses and to head off. By now you are absolutely shocked. They said they'd come. Everything is ready. What kind of guests are these? How rude. Your shock turns to anger. There is no excuse for this rudeness.

This is almost the same situation as Jesus' story. The guests had said yes and when they were summoned, they made all kinds of lame excuses and they pike out.

The host has every reason to be angry. Insults and injustice always cause anger.

Now; what will the host do with his anger? Will he bitch and moan? Will he smash something? Will he pay that rude lot back? The master became so angry that he said, "Go as fast as you can to every street and alley in town! Bring in everyone who is poor or crippled or blind or lame."

The Master's anger is constructively turned into grace. "Bring in the outsiders, the ones society rejects." Some versions translate it as "Compel people to enter." Christians over the centuries have misused this statement and forced people to convert to their particular form of Christianity – often violently so.

But Jesus' point is that any outsider, with no social status, would have a hard time believing they really were invited. I wonder if you are a bit like me and sometimes think "Why on earth would the Lord choose me? I am no-one special." The first time we hear we are wanted, we often think, "Oh that person is just being nice. They don't really want me."

The messenger has some convincing to do. The Master really does want those outside the fold.

The shepherd who leaves the 99 for the one also has some convincing to do. The one who has left mistakenly believes they are not part of the whole. They may think they are not wanted; they don't fit; no-one cares etc. They may have good reasons for leaving. The 99 probably weren't as kind as they could have been. The 99 might have misunderstood the one. They may have been judgemental or smug. But the 99 need the one and the one needs the 99.

The banquet at the end of the age is for a community, not a group of individual Christians. The sheep fold is for a community, not for the insiders.

The 99 have a duty to include the one. It isn't just the shepherd who is to go seeking for the ones who are outside the fold. The 99 have received such grace; surely we want to share that grace.

When the one comes in, we need to welcome them and to encourage them. How do you think we could do that? How do you think we might actively pursue the one who has left? Perhaps some have not left yet but are feeling on the edge of things, not really part of us. How can we let them know we do care about them and we want them in our midst?

Sometime in the early 1900s, a nine year old boy was learning the piano. He got tired of practicing and wanted to give up. So his mother bought tickets to see the great pianist Paderewski play. The day arrived and the mother and boy found their seats in the great hall. Before the concert began, the mother saw someone she wanted to talk to so she left the boy in his seat.

As he looked around the young fellow saw this huge black Steinway concert grand piano. The lid was up, the seat was there and it was ready to play. It was too tempting for the young fellow.

So the young man went up the steps and began to play – and he played chopsticks. The audience jeered and the Mum was hugely embarrassed. Calls of “Get off. Stop that,” resounded around the hall.

Then Paderewski heard what was going on. He slipped quietly on to the stage. Coming from behind the boy, he reached around him and improvised a beautiful melody to go with Chopsticks. Then he said to the boy “Keep playing. Don’t quit. Don’t stop.”

Jesus expects his followers to go the extra mile in caring for and encouraging those who respond to his call. Especially if it is early days in someone’s faith journey we are to be gracious, and very importantly, we are to listen to them and to reflect on our own faith walk. Often newcomers, or those on the edge, have a different perspective that we need to hear.

The Hope Project is coming. We’ve been talking about giving invitations, telling our story, using our gifts, sharing our faith. I’m sure this is scary for some of you. But there is something that will make it easy for us.

The Hope Project is coming to New Zealand. Next weekend every household in NZ, unless they have a “No circulars” sign on their letter box, will receive in their letterbox, a booklet about the Hope there is in Jesus Christ. There will be television advertisements and there is an excellent website for people to go to and find out more.

Our church has financially contributed to this project which will make it easier for us to begin conversations with those around us. All we need to say is “Did you receive the booklet in the mail? What did you think?”

And then we engage the conversation. So the challenge for us now is to go after the one, whether that one has never heard the gospel, or whether they are struggling with church. One way to do that is to simply engage them in conversation. What ways is God calling you to show grace to the one? What will you do about it?