

Counting Sheep Luke Edwards

In one of my horribly boring seminary classes a few months ago I was asked to look into the Old Testament origins of a quote in Jude 1:12. I was sent to Ezekiel 34, and the contents of this Chapter have haunted me on a daily basis ever since. In Ezekiel 34 God mounts a case against the leaders of Israel, and it's not looking good for them. He leads off with a question, the latest in our sermon series, the questions that God asks.

God through the prophet Ezekiel asks, *"Ah you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?"* He continues, *"You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost."* It's as if God is saying, "Shepherds you had one job, feed the sheep. As leaders of Israel God had trusted them to feed his flock, but all they could manage to do was feed themselves at the expense of the flock."

Then God continues with a description of himself, a perfect contrast. He says, *"I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out... I myself will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy."*

I read this and I just sat there for about an hour. My first thought was, "I hope I'm not a shepherd that feeds himself." My second thought, I probably am and I'm glad I read this verse now rather than ten years into my career. I'm a young pastor, less than a year under my belt, and if I'm honest with y'all 85% of the time I have no idea what I'm doing. How do you support a congregant going through unspeakable tragedy? What do you do with your hands when your leading communion? Seriously, it's a lot to learn. In just a few months of ministry I have felt the pull of self-promotion and careerism. I've been tempted on many occasions to feed myself at the expense of what the church needs. Thank God for his word. While there may not be clear instructions on what to do with your hands in the Bible, in this prophesy God seems to be pretty clear in these instructions for his leaders, **don't seek your own benefit, seek the lost**. Seems pretty simple, yet when I look around I don't see too many of us doing it.

This prophesy of Ezekiel had a profound impact on the early Christians; it's referenced over and over again in the Gospels and New Testament. It would have been impossible for Jesus's audience not to think of this verse when he told them the parable of the lost sheep, our scripture for today from my favorite gospel. Please stand for the reading of God's word.

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 persons who need no repentance."

Jesus is traveling across the countryside preaching the good news of the coming kingdom to the crowds. In his travels Jesus is connecting with some shiesty characters; tax collectors, zealots, prostitutes, lepers. It's getting to the point that the religious folks are feeling a little uncomfortable. You see the Pharisees had religion all figured out, they had it down to a science, it was pretty simple. Follow the rules, do good things, you get labeled righteous and can be included in the rewards of God. Break the rules, do bad things, you are labeled bad, and you are exiled from the community of God and can't have any rewards. This kind of religion made life pretty easy to figure out. It was really clear who was good and who was bad. The guys and gals that followed the rules (in public at least) were good. The guys and gals that got caught breaking the rules were bad. There wasn't much grey, just good and bad, in and out. These clear labels were helpful because the good people weren't supposed to mix with the bad people otherwise they themselves might become bad. This whole system was working great, especially for the Pharisees who were extra good because then they got power.

It's not all that different of an ethic that gets practiced in the American church today. I have had many a conversation with folks who were raised to think that people who drink are bad people, people who smoke are bad people. Whether their Sunday school teachers or parents meant to or not, they were raised to think that people who do bad things are bad people and you should probably stay away from them. I can personally recall youth group lessons that told me not to be friends with non-Christians. That if I did, I could lose my faith. I understand where they were coming from, the easiest way to teach ethics to a child is to make it black and white. So we craft our simple ethics to look a lot like the Pharisees. Church is for the folks that behave themselves in public, and the other folks can have their fun out there. Our pharisaical system seems to be working fine. Amen, cue the choir.

Oh wait, we forgot about Jesus. Jesus comes along and completely throws the Pharisees ethics out. Not slightly tweaking them, but throwing them on the ground and stomping them with his cool leather sandals. This is why I love Jesus. He doesn't even have to say anything to make the Pharisees mad. He does it by the friends he chooses. Listen to what the Pharisees say, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So here is Jesus, this brilliant teacher of the law, this prime candidate for the religious elite, yet he welcomes sinners. This word "welcomes" in the greek means to accept. So Jesus isn't just letting sinners be near him, he's accepting them. He's not just letting them come to his soup kitchen, he's inviting them over for Sunday dinner as important guests.

I hope you can see how big of deal this is. Jesus is destroying, pulverizing, the labels that have been put on these people by the Pharisees. This is not a critique on the Pharisees labels, this is an all out attack. One commentary I read this week said, "Jesus' failure to observe such distinctions seemed to some dangerous to the moral and religious fiber of the community and disturbingly radical."¹ Jesus was busting the foundation on which the whole community was built. Nobody knew what to do without these labels.

Jesus proposes a new ethic. One in which we are all broken, and yet we are all welcome at his table. Jesus proclaims the incomprehensible good news that in him we can all find forgiveness. No one is outside of the reach of his love, there is nothing that we can say or do that will render us unforgiveable. We must merely accept his invitation and find our seat at the table. He once and for all broke the chains that held us in captivity.

¹ Craddock, 185

Yet somehow we the American Church find ourselves back in Egypt. Somehow we look around at the ethics of our churches and see we are looking a lot like the Pharisees. Weighed down by all the stones in our pockets, ready to throw at a moments notice. Watching and waiting for the preacher to say one sentence we disagree with, waiting for someone around us to make a mistake. Our fingers always pointed at others, rarely pointed at ourselves.

Jesus proposes a different way. A way that welcomes all, forgives all, accepts all. It is not a way void of accountability, but it's an accountability that follows friendship. Why do we think it's the right way to go about making new disciples by telling them about all of their mistakes. "Hey, y'all are terrible. Want to be a part of our community?" Gee that's tempting. One young man at King Street Church told me this week, "People in the church are way more likely to fight us than love us."

The more I spend time with people outside of the church, the harder time I have with the labels of good and bad. The people society has labeled as bad are far more good than I expected and the good people have more skeletons in their closet than I could have imagined. This week I saw a guy with tattoos all over his body and head paying the parking meter for an elderly woman having trouble figuring out the new meters downtown. Last week in the jail, a man told me that the hardest part of jail is not being able to apologize to the people he has hurt. This man who did some pretty terrible things to land him there, is not a monster, but immensely broken, burdened by his mistakes. What about the situation in Baltimore? How many facebook comments this week labeled the rioters as monsters, dismissing the decades of crippling poverty and lack of opportunity that led to such desperation. If facebook comments are an indication of our hearts, we are in trouble.

Underneath the surface we are the same, people broken before a loving God. Can we quit fooling ourselves that we are somehow closer to God because of our public behavior? In Christ there is no label of good or bad, just the label of beloved.

Jesus not only breaks the labels of our so called moral society, but he places a disproportionate amount of value upon those that are lost. In the parable of the lost sheep the shepherd leaves 99 sheep unattended to find the one that is lost. How is that for mathematics, 1 is greater than 99. I took a very basic medical ethics class in high school and I remember the question if you could save one person or 1000 people but not both who would you save? Everyone in the class said they would save the 1000. Everyone was reluctant to not save the one, but in the end all elected to save the 1000. Yet God is willing to risk the safety of his 99 to save the 1. How loudly does this speak to the heart of God?

God is disproportionately concerned about those outside of the church. This parable may be specifically referring to the lost people of Israel, but it is no stretch to apply it to his lost gentiles today.

Let's look back at the words of God himself in Ezekiel 34, "*I myself will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.*" God's heart desperately longs for the lost, he desires that all would come back into his flock. He is not worried about how strong we are, how spiritually healthy we are, he just wants us near him. And once we are near him, he will nurse us back to health. God's heart is disproportionately pointed towards the lost, is ours? How much time do you spend with those that are outside of the church? How many of your friends are not Christian? How many of our programs at Boone UMC are geared towards the unchurched? How much of our church budget is spent on those outside the church? Our faith promise missions pledges are abysmal this year.

God's percentages are a bit hard to handle. 1 over 99 is pretty intense. The Methodist church's percentages are a little easier to handle. In the discipline it says that the three chief callings of the church are the maintenance of corporate worship, the building up of believers and sending the faithful out in mission. That's one third of our calling that is pointed outside of the walls of the church. That's a little easier to handle, but are we even doing this?

So we see Jesus busting open the gates of God's kingdom, unlocking the door, inviting all into the party, no matter what they've done. We see God's heart burning for the lost, aching for those outside to come in. So the question that remains is how? How do we bring in the lost?

This is the question that the American church is facing more than ever. How can we effectively invite those outside in. The cultural expectations of attending church are declining rapidly with each generation. In most of our country it is no longer a normal part of life to attend church on Sunday morning, it is no longer what you do. There is no social stigma for not going to church. The Bible Belt might be a bit behind in this, compared to the northeast where I grew up, but I assure you it is not far behind. All the statistics point to our lifetime containing the most dramatic decline in church attendance that we have ever seen.² We are less than a century from the post-Christian society that is being experienced in Europe.³ **Vertical Church**

So what does this mean for us, as a people called to invite the lost into the fold of God? It means we are not doing our jobs. The human race has never stopped adapting, yet in the midst of one of the biggest declines in church attendance the church refuses to adapt. We tighten the worship leaders jeans, play cooler songs, get better coffee, buy a fog machine, and hope for the best.⁴ But this rarely brings lost people in. We are past the days of people outside of the church wandering into church because of a great service. We have to go to the lost.

Notice, in our parable that the shepherd does not stay with his 99 and shout really loud to get the lost sheep to come back to him, he doesn't brew some good smelling coffee so the sheep will follow his nose back. No, he goes into the thickets and grabs him. So how do we as a church move forward. It's three equally important steps. We create a welcoming, strong church that people want to be a part of, we break down the walls that are keeping the lost out, and we go out of the church building to invite people in.

Creating a welcoming, healthy church is the first step. Our life together as a church has to be something that people desire. No one wants to join a church that is solely focused on the mundane. No one is dying to join a church that can't stop bickering over the color of the carpets. People want to belong to a church that welcomes them and loves them deeply, a church that cares for them and their family. The quality of our lives together is paramount to bringing in the lost. The greatest worship service pales in comparison to deep community. When we focus all our energy on a great Sunday morning service we do not create disciples, we create consumers. We have to be a church that loves each other unconditionally.

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steve-mcswain/why-nobody-wants-to-go-to_b_4086016.html

³ For an alternative reading of the statistics see <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/october/state-of-american-church.html>

⁴ Read a recent opinion piece by Rachel Held Evans in the Washington Post, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/jesus-doesnt-tweet/2015/04/30/fb07ef1a-ed01-11e4-8666-a1d756d0218e_story.html?postshare=571430425649860

I love this quote by Will Willimon from his commentary on acts, “When you think about it, the quality of the church’s life together is evidence for the truthfulness of the resurrection. The most eloquent testimony to the reality of the resurrection is not an empty tomb or a well-orchestrated pageant on Easter Sunday but rather a group of people whose life together is so radically different, so completely changed from the way the world builds a community, that there can be no explanation other than that something decisive has happened in history.”⁵ I love this quote so much, the way we live in community as a church is more of a testament to the resurrection than even an empty grave.

The second step is to break down the walls that have been built around the church. Walls that keep people from being able to approach the church even if they wanted to. What are these walls I’m speaking of. One survey stands out to me as a clear picture of the walls we’ve built around the church.

When non-Christians aged 16 to 29 years old were asked, “What is your current perception of Christianity?” here’s how they responded:

- 91% anti-homosexual
- 87% judgmental
- 85% hypocritical
- 78% old-fashioned
- 75% too involved in politics
- 70% out of touch with reality
- 70% insensitive to others⁶

Church, this is what we’re known for. Notice any common themes? All of these are perceptions of things the church is against. Society only knows us for what we are against. They know nothing about what we are for. Where is grace, forgiveness, community, peace, love? It sounds like we are a bunch of hate-mongers that do nothing but point fingers at others. This is far from the truth, but it is the perception out there. The church is beautiful, I have experienced countless graces through her, yet the only voice heard by our society is one of hate. We cannot afford to let that be the case any longer. We must as a church in this community of Boone become known for our love, acceptance, and care for each other. **Until we bust the perceptions the lost wont even be able to get close to us before they turn around.**

The third step in bringing in the lost is to learn from the God who seeks out the lost. We cannot expect people to come to us. We have to go out and be in relationship with people outside of the church. Augustine describes our calling in his 46th sermon, “I shall recall the straying; I shall seek the lost. Whether they wish it or not, I shall do it. And should the brambles of the forests tear at me when I seek them, I shall force myself through all straits; I shall pull down all hedges. So far as the God whom I fear grants me the strength, I shall search everywhere. I shall recall the straying; I shall seek after those on the verge of being lost.”⁷ Seeking the lost is no walk in the park, its dangerous and toiling. It costs something of us.

⁵ Willimon, 51.

⁶ <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/culture/10-challenges-facing-us-next-decade>

⁷ Augustine (Sermo 46, 14-15: CCL 41, 541-542)

In this post modern age where people outside of the church deeply distrust the church we can only bring people into the church that we are in relationship with. No amount of marketing, tract giving, or invitations to strangers will compare to building deep relationships with those folks outside of the church. Not fake relationships masking ulterior motives of another soul to notch on your belt. Real relationships, deep friendships, where you commit to loving them unconditionally and sacrificially, no matter what the outcome. Relationships marked in honesty, not manipulation, love not judgment.

The American church is in decline because we have kept it for ourselves. An organization that constantly looks inward is doomed to fail. William Temple, an Anglican archbishop put it this way, “The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.”⁸

If we are to turn the decline around we have to match our hearts with the heart of God, a heart that leaves 99 for 1.

I'll close with a beautiful conversion story I heard last week in the Watauga county jail. If you're like me you hear so few of these stories, that you wonder if true conversions still exist in the American church. On Wednesday mornings myself and a few others go into the county jail to lead a discussion on a passage of scripture with the men waiting for their court dates behind bars. A young man who has been in the jail for almost a year told us the story of his conversion a few months ago. He had a particularly rough day in jail that day and had called his grandmother to hear her soothing voice. She heard him out and suggested like so many times before that he pray. For some reason this time he decided he actually would give it a try. He went back to his cell and prayed like he had tried so many times before, but this time it actually felt like someone was listening. He told some of the other men later that night in their nightly bible study, did you know almost all of our pods in the jail have a daily inmate led bible study? Breaking labels baby. Anyways he told his friends his experience and they prayed with him and he invited Christ into his life. Now here comes my favorite part of the story. He described the feeling that followed as God holding a lighter under his heart. The inner John Wesley nerd in me jumped when he said this. As John Wesley famously described his own conversion experience as his heart being strangely warmed. This young man in the county jail, took his seat at the table of Christ, and I know that there was great rejoicing in heaven that evening!

May we be a church that causes the heavens to be in constant celebration for the lost being found. Amen

⁸ This quotation is widely attributed to William Temple (1881-1944), but I could not find a solid reference.