

## ***“Nibbling Our Way Away”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 11, 2016  
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Holy Scriptures: **Luke 15:1-10**

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.

“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

### **Nibbling our way away**

*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.”*

The Holy Bible offers stories and parables, psalms and testimonies  
which point listeners toward a Living God  
who seeks after the lost and breaks bread with sinners.

The Holy Scriptures speak of a Living, Loving God  
for whom being lost is worse than being dead!

When one soul is found, is redeemed from a state of being lost,  
there is cause for a party across the heavens and on earth.

*And Jesus told them this parable, saying:  
“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep,  
if he has lost one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness,  
and go after the one which 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.”*

### **Nibbling our way away**

A sheep nibbles it's way lost.  
Oh, here is a nice patch of grass.  
Oh, there is a gentle stream.  
Oh, here is some cool shade.  
Oh, there is... Uh oh, where is everybody?!

Sheep that stray away from the flock and end up lost and alone  
really, rarely don't start out that way.  
Sheep start out well intentioned,  
meaning to be good and do well and meet an immediate need,  
only to discover they have nibbled their way lost.  
Sheep stray off the path one step at a time.  
Without meaning to they become isolated from their flock.  
At the end of the day they look up  
only to realize that all they have known and loved is gone.  
A sheep's journey from home to being lost  
is gradual, subtle, unintentional,  
a slow drifting away from the familiar out into the unknown,  
one nibble at a time.  
Finding oneself in a state of lost-ness  
is when fear and despair, anxiety and inner doubt creep in and take up  
residence.

Jesus the Good Shepherd uses sheep as a metaphor,  
a gentle metaphor for the humanity He loves so much.  
This week Anna Dewdney passed away.  
She authored numerous books for children using animals as the main characters.  
She felt that her books were not complete until they had been read by an adult to a child.  
Her most famous book is probably *Llama Llama Red Pajama*.  
She grasped that children relate to animals better than they do to adults.  
Kids connect with how animals live life simply, honestly,  
with sheer joy and the gift of being totally present in the moment.  
One day I hope to grow into being the person my dog thinks I am.

Jesus' parable on the 99 and one sheep has more than a kernel of truth.  
Jesus also grasped that human nature is eerily similar to a sheep's behavior in a field.  
Pretty much every bad thing started out as well intentioned.  
Abusive behavior and sinful actions often begin  
when we go astray by nibbling our way away.  
Take any example from human history and back up to its beginning.  
I am sure that no one thought, *"Oh, I am going to institute human trafficking."*  
One person takes control of another soul's life,  
and then another, and another, and more people follow suit,  
and before you know it we have nibbled our way away.

The genesis of becoming lost is often the same:  
we start out well-intentioned and nibble our way away.

The genesis is that we start out meaning well,  
yet so easily stray from who and Whose we are.  
The genesis is rarely as difficult as the place in which we end up,  
the trifecta sense of helplessness, hopelessness, and homelessness.

The revelation is that no matter how often or how far we stray from God's path  
we are never, ever lost in the eyes of God.  
The revelation is that the Good Shepherd is always looking, always seeking,  
always searching for sheep who stray,  
for we who nibble our way lost and are in deep need of being found.  
The revelation is that Jesus Christ is God Incarnate:  
Jesus is the love of God made manifest,  
sent to redeem us and welcome us back,  
the Living Trinity of help, hope, and home.

### **Nibbling our way away**

To those who are in the flock of 100 minus one,  
who seek to do everything the Good Shepherd says and directs,  
who give of their wool and graze where told,  
this parable may seem a bit unfair.  
Who wants to be told you will be left alone  
while the shepherd seeks for the one lost sheep?  
Yet this is the gospel truth.  
To those who show up in church week after week,  
who keep the church school humming,  
who serve selflessly in mission projects and community service programs,  
who stock the fellowship meals with delicious dishes and desserts,  
this may seem unreasonable and tad bit unfair,  
This is the Gospel.  
The Gospel says that we are the church, and the church is all of us.  
We who once were lost and have been found are now to be seekers.  
We who know what it is like – and my memories are very fresh on this one –  
we who know what it is like to be on the outside looking in,  
to be on the fringe,  
to feel left out and then brought home,  
to be welcomed into the fold of God's grace  
and have a party thrown!...  
...well, y'all are now called by God to invest in a shepherd's  
staff.

And as Christ searches, as He seeks and finds,  
he looks back over his shoulder to see if we are following him.

Henri Nouwen wrote that the role of the church in the world is that of "hospice".  
We are called to take all that we experience as threatening and hostile,  
and transform it into "hospice",  
a place of shelter and rest for those who have nibbled their way away.

### **Nibbling our way away**

As we look around the world today, there is a lot of nibbling away;  
there are also attempts to nibble our way back – or forward – toward  
wholeness.

Consider an article in the [NY Times](#) this week entitled:  
*Campuses Cautiously Train Freshmen Against Subtle Insults*

*“WORCESTER, Mass.[i]*

*A freshman tentatively raises her hand and takes the microphone.*

*“I’m really scared to ask this,” she begins.*

*“When I, as a white female, listen to music that uses the N word, and I’m in the car,  
or, especially when I’m with all white friends, is it O.K. to sing along?”*

*The answer, from Sheree Marlowe, the new chief diversity officer at Clark University,  
is an unequivocal “no.”*

*The exchange was included in Ms. Marlowe’s presentation  
to recently arriving first-year students  
focusing on subtle “microaggressions,”  
part of a new campus vocabulary  
that also includes “safe spaces” and “trigger warnings.”  
Microaggressions, Ms. Marlowe said, are comments, snubs or insults  
that communicate derogatory or negative messages  
that might not be intended to cause harm  
but are targeted at people  
based on their membership in a marginalized group.*

*Among her other tips:*

*Don’t ask an Asian student you don’t know for help on your math homework  
or randomly ask a black student if he plays basketball.*

*Both questions make assumptions based on stereotypes.*

*And don’t say “you guys.”*

*It could be interpreted as leaving out women, said Ms. Marlowe,  
who realized it was offensive only when someone confronted her  
for saying it during a presentation.”*

On Campus and in the Church, at School or at Work,  
on the air in public or in the voting booth in private,  
it is not okay to practice hate, in ways great or small.

Macroaggressions are not okay.

Microaggressions are not okay.

Just like you can’t be a little bit pregnant, we shan’t be a little bit derogatory.

We live in a day and age where some folks act like it is okay to be a little bit racist,  
or to be a little bit sexist,

or a little bit discriminatory

against the poor or people of color or someone from a  
foreign land,

when the reality is

that we are all international,

we are all wearing pigmentation in our skin somewhere,  
we are all dependent upon one another.

So Bravo and Amen and Alleluia!

when teachers and students, parents and children, families of all shapes,  
when Christians and Jews and Muslims

start to nibble our way back to God and toward each other.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said,

*“In a real sense all life is interrelated.*

*All persons are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,  
tied in a single garment of destiny.*

*Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.*

*I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be,  
and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.  
This is the inter-related structure of reality.”*

### **Nibbling our way away**

A simple, I-can-do-this approach to nibbling our way home  
is to tithe our burdens or sins, our anxieties or prejudices,  
our doubts or fears: tithe them to God.

That is right; tithe your burdens and sins to God.

Each time you take Holy Communion give God ten percent  
of whatever is holding you back or holding you down  
or holding you apart or holding you up.

Relax; it is impossible to give everything away all at once. Not happening.

But we can do a little bit, a nibble or two, each time.

Little by little the load is lessened, the thermostat is adjusted, the pile of junk is lowered.

Little by little you feel better, you can think clearer, your spirit is heightened.

You begin to feel that incredible lightness of being.

When you walk away from the Communion Table

there is always the risk you might overhear a voice saying,

*“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”*

And you can smile & laugh & rejoice, and respond with the rest of us sinners, say,

*“Yeah, that’s me. I just nibbled my way back to Jesus,  
and it feels so good to be home again.”*

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

[i] *“Campuses Cautiously Train Freshmen Against Subtle Insults”* By [STEPHANIE SAUL](#), *N Y Times*, SEPT. 6, 2016.