

“Stories of God and Life: Club 99”

One of the better known stories of Jesus is the parable of the lost sheep. A shepherd has 100 sheep, and one of them gets lost. Sheep often would stray away from the flock – they may nibble themselves lost! This devoted shepherd leaves the 99 who are safe to seek out the one lost sheep. He searches and searches until he finds it. When he does, he puts over his shoulder and joyfully goes back home: “Old Black Ear got lost again, but I found her! Let’s have party!” Then these words of Jesus: “There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (Luke 15:7).

What prompted this story? Luke tells us: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to (Jesus). And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them’” (Luke 15:1-2).

Jesus associated with tax collectors and sinners. People hated tax collectors. They worked for the Romans, the enemy, who occupied Palestine. And, most tax collectors made their money by cheating people. “Sinners” were not necessarily bad people, but they were the “People of the Land”. They didn’t bother with all the religious rules of the scribes and Pharisees. They could be lovely people, good husbands and fathers, good wives and mothers. They just weren’t into the *institutional church* of their day. And the Pharisees and teachers of the law were ticked off at Jesus for associating with them.

This parable is an incredibly simple story, yet it profoundly reveals the heart of God. I find myself drawn more and more back to this story. Why? Because I think *most churches are more like the scribes and Pharisees than we are like Jesus!*

Jesus associated with all kinds of people. He didn’t just hang out with “church people”. He met unchurched people on their turf – on beaches, at their jobs, in their homes, in the market-places, by the roadside. He didn’t hold meetings and worship services in church and hope people would come! He went out and about and got to know people where they were, as they were.

Jesus was so different from the scribes and Pharisees, leaders in the “established church”. These scribes and Pharisees were sincere in their desire to serve God. They were devoutly religious. But their religion prompted them to avoid and condemn people who weren’t like them.

They were like a ***“religious club”*** – they wanted no part of outsiders unless outsiders were willing to *be like them!* In fact, they were sure God didn’t care at all about these “unchurched” people. Unlike them, Jesus befriended all types of people, and in so doing revealed a God who’s *more interested in reaching 1 lost sheep than 99 who are safe in the club!*

In this parable we see that God comes after us – God seeks us! God seeks you! You are important to God. Maybe you don’t feel important. You’ve gone through a divorce and feel hurt, you have felt rejection. Perhaps you never got much affirmation as a child and still struggle with issues of low self-esteem. Or you might be widowed, and feel lonely and uncared for. Maybe you are in your senior years and you realize you’ve never become the person you had hoped to be. Nevertheless, you are important to God! And *everyone* matters to God!

Jesus talked about and embodied a God who searches for spiritually lost people. All of us either were at one time lost, or still are lost, because we are sinners, and our sins separate us from God. We can be into bad stuff and be lost – drugs, cheating, lying, all types of immoral or disgusting behaviors. But we can be nice people, decent, religious people, and be lost. It’s just that our sins are more subtle sins like self-righteousness and pride (putting self at the center of life rather than God). Jesus once said of Himself, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). God loves lost people and wants them to be found!

Often the church isn’t very much like Jesus! We pay more attention to the “99” than we do to the 1 out there wandering around lost! In fact, sometimes the church really *is* more like a club than the Church – ***Club 99***. We join the club (church membership). We pray our dues (offering envelopes). We enjoy the privileges of club membership (we are cared for by the church leaders, get visited by the pastor if we’re sick, etc.). And we can come to like it in the club! You see your friends. Club members plan things that club members enjoy doing. We can choose from a list of club activities like Sunday School classes, worship services, Bible studies, small group meetings, youth activities and the like! We also tend to judge and evaluate people by how much time they spend at the club!

The problem is: the Church is supposed to be like Jesus. We are the Body of Christ in the world. And like the Lord, we are supposed to be focused more on the lost outside the church than the 99 safe inside the church!

To put it another way: Our primary effort and passion should be reaching out to the lost! When I was young, our favorite spot to play ice hockey in the winter was a pond in Lititz called Rudy’s Dam. One bitter cold February night I took my hockey stick and gloves and skates and rode up to Rudy’s Dam with another player who was on our ice hockey team. It was late in the skating season for natural ice, and the ice at the pond was rather thin. When we got there, nobody was there but us. It was dark. Ray and I managed to get into the little building by the pond and we turned on the lights that were strung across the ice (something we really shouldn’t have done, since the Boy Scouts were in charge of the lights and there were no Boy Scouts there that night. So Ray and I skated a while, passing and shooting the puck. At one point, one of us missed a pass and the puck went into an area of thin ice. Ray said to let it go, we’d just use another puck. But I was determined I was going to retrieve that puck! Then the ice cracked and my one leg went into the ice cold water and his the mud underneath.

Well, I was freezing, and Ray said, “Let’s go home.” Now he had driven that night. He had just bought an old car, but he was bragging on the way to the lake how it had never left him down and how reliable it was. We got into the car, and....you can guess what happened. It wouldn’t start. There we were, all by ourselves, in the dark, with no one around, and me freezing and feeling all yucky with mud and ice covering my one leg. This was in the days before sell phones, so Ray walked to the nearest house and made a phone call to my dad to come and pick us up.

Now why am I telling you this story? Because I was heck bent on getting that puck that we had

lost. In those days you could probably buy a new hockey puck for maybe 25 cents. But I went out on thin ice just to seek a lost puck. How much more valuable are lost *people* than lost *pucks*.

Okay. It's easy for a preacher to spout off about how we "have to reach out to the lost" But... ***how do we reach people of our generation?*** I want to share some insights that I've gotten from a man named Reggie McNeal. He is a church consultant who, I believe, has his finger on the pulse of American culture, how it's changing, and how the church must change if we are going to reach lost people today. He talks about the collapse of the "church culture" – and how evangelizing today is a different ballgame than it was 20 or 30 years ago.

Soon after I came to this church, I preached a sermon on how something remarkable (and challenging) is happening in the United States. While many cultures throughout history have basically remained the same for hundreds, even thousands of years, in our American culture over the last number of years, *each new generation* is in some ways a different culture from the previous generation. Each new generation sees life and understands reality through different lenses.

Social scientists have labelled the generations in this way: Builders (those born 1924-1945); Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964); Gen-Xers or Baby Busters (those born 1965-1983); and Millennials (those born from the early 1980's – 2000).

There are two important factors I want to mention as we look at these different generations.

First of all, each succeeding generation is less likely to identify with institutional religion and traditional church. It has been estimated that 60%-64% of Builders identified with the Christian movement as expressed in the organized church. But for Millennials, it is estimated that less than 10% identify with Christianity and its traditional forms.

Yet what do we do in the Church? We expect people on their own to find their way to our doors, join our club, and act like us! And it just isn't happening! (That would be like a shepherd hanging around the sheep fold and expecting lost sheep to come back on their own)! I have a friend who is now about 90 years of age. Some years ago I was trying to convince him that traditional church (and especially traditional worship services) are just not cutting it with more and more people. But I got the distinct feeling that I wasn't convincing him one bit that this was true. But later, he sent me a newspaper article which was making the point that church as we have been doing it is simply boring for an increasing number of people!

A second observation as we look at how each new generation has been in some ways a different culture from the previous generation: There is good evidence that even though more and more people are identifying with "no religion" when asked for their religious preferences, there is a craving for "spirituality". People are hungry for God, but not necessarily all the trappings of the church that we've held onto. Many people are turning to other places, other voices, to fill their God-void. For instance, Oprah Winfrey has become a spiritual guide for many people today. Yet her faith is more an amalgamation of various religions than it is "Christian." But

Oprah knows the culture and can speak in language that allows many people to connect.

So, if a church is going to be like Jesus, and reach out to lost people, we have to decide who we want to reach, since each succeeding culture is in some ways different.. It's not a "one size fits all" anymore. For example, if we want to reach elderly people with the gospel, we are going to have to present the message in a much different form than if we want to reach teenagers or young adult couples.

The parable of the lost sheep is so simple, and it reveals heart of God. It reminds us that *the primary mission of the church is not to the 99 already saved, but the 1 outside the fold.*

Now please hear this: I am not saying that what we do inside building is not important. Gathering together as believers is important. We come here to get renewed... to learn and to grow...to be trained and equipped to serve the Lord in the world. The church building and gathering is like our retreat center, our training camp, our launching pad – *to prepare us for our primary mission, which is to share the good news of Jesus to those outside the fold!*

See how different this is from the "Club 99" mentality, where being involved in the church becomes an end in itself and the measure of our spirituality. Like the more hours I log in the church building the more Christian I am. Actually, hanging out with Christian friends here at "the club" can become an escape from building relationships with unchurched people outside the church.

I have to admit, I'm preaching to myself today! If it's easy for you to hide in your little church cocoon, it's just as easy for me as a pastor. It's easy for pastors to spend all our time with church people. It's easier for me to talk about Jesus here than with my neighbors who don't go to church, or others in my community who don't know I'm a pastor. Over years, I've tried to be involved in the community so I can build some relationships with unsaved people. That was much easier to do when our kids were in school. Nancy and I got involved with other parents in our kids' activities. It has been more difficult since our children are grown. There aren't these natural avenues for relating to unchurched people. To address this, one year I agreed to be the timekeeper at the local high school ice hockey games just so I could build some relationships with people outside the church.

The Old Testament Scripture reading today is Ezekiel 34:1-12. Jesus must have had this Scripture in mind when He told the parable of the lost sheep. In the Ezekiel text God condemns the leaders of Israel for failing to shepherd the people. Look at Ezekiel 34:2-4: "Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them – to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the 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, but with force and harshness you have ruled them." Notice, "you have not sought the lost"! God says more through the prophet, "My sheep were scattered, they

wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them” (Ezekiel 34:6). How different from the shepherd in Jesus’ parable! Because of the failure of these shepherds God is against them. God Himself will take the lead in seeking the lost sheep. “For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out” (verse 11). That’s the kind of God we have!

This has been a hard sermon to preach. But let me close with some stories of people who are taking the gospel to the streets, reaching people where they are, as they are. Years ago when I was serving churches in the Pocono Mountains I learned of a truck stop ministry along Interstate 80. It was a ministry sponsored by the Council of Churches. An article in the local newspaper highlighted this ministry where an ordained clergyman hung out at the truck stop, just talking with and listening to these over the road truckers. Why can’t a church do this kind of simple, caring ministry?

Bill Easum is an ordained United Methodist ministry, and now a prominent church consultant. When he was a pastor he provided leadership for a congregation that grew very large. One of the key things he did was to spend his Friday evenings in one of the local bars, just talking to people, listening to their life stories, and building relationships with them. Many wound up coming to his church. They became disciples of Jesus. So that congregation grew into large church, not by taking in people from other churches, but by bringing unchurched and unsaved people to faith in the Lord.

One of places where people gather today is a shopping mall. In some ways our malls have been the modern counterpart to the “marketplace” in Bible times. I’ve often thought, “What about having a church in a mall?” No, I’m not thinking about handing out gospel tracts, but renting a store in the mall, where perhaps you could sell Bibles and religious books and articles. But you could also have study groups there, have a counselor on duty, perhaps offer weekday worship services or early Sunday worship for employees of the mall stores. In other words you would be a “Christian presence” in that place where unchurched people gather. Actually, today malls are on the decline. Online shopping is taking over. So the modern “marketplace” is becoming more and more online shopping. The web. Social media. Facebook, Twitter, web sites etc. More and more churches are taking seriously how we need to reach unchurched people through the internet and social media.

More and more people today have grown up with no experience of church, no Christian memory. The only exposure many people have to Christianity is through today’s media: TV preachers (good and bad), news items which almost always are negative when anything is said about Christians and the church. As a result: many view Christians and the church with skepticism and cynicism. They won’t listen to what we say, because they *don’t trust us*. Therefore, much evangelism today has to begin with humble service – serving, helping, giving, without asking anything in return.

In one church I served we began to take this seriously. We set up a prayer tent at the local flea market, where we would listen to people, and offer to pray for them. One year, on the first

Sunday of the new year, instead of the usual sermon, we invited the police chief of our town, the elementary school principal, and a man in our congregation who as a national leader in the Lions' Club, and we asked them to share their view of what our community needed, and ways the church could respond. One result of this special Sunday emphasis was that our congregation "adopted" a nearby elementary school. Some of our members would go to the school once a week to read to the younger students, or help the teachers. We offered financial assistance if the school knew of a family in need. Some of our members baked goodies and took them in to the teachers and staff. This outreach brought a new energy and enthusiasm to our congregation!

I am glad that this church, Community UMC, twice a year provides the community meal in one of the churches in Lancaster. A few months back one of our small groups, our golfing small group, had a really neat outreach. Someone from that group will share a little bit about this event.

Reggie McNeal has said that the single biggest need in the church today is to shift from a *member* mentality to *mission* mentality! I think he is right on!

The simple parable of the lost sheep shows us what brings joy to the heart of God! It isn't when we Club 99 members hang out at the club and do things we enjoy. It's when our focus is on leaving the building and sharing the good news of Jesus with lost people. Seeking the lost is a priority on God's agenda. When the church is like Jesus, that will be #1 on our agenda too!

Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
July 29, 2018

