

6/30/19

“The Value of People”

*Matthew 18:1-7, 10-14***Pastor Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

Have you ever been lost? I don't mean lost driving around in a car; I mean really lost like in the woods or hiking. It must be a pretty scary. People die because they get lost and they can't find their way back to safety and rescuers aren't able to find them. Maybe you saw the story about Christopher Staff the 70-year-old man from Dorchester who went missing while hiking last Monday in New Hampshire's White Mountains. So many people spent time trying to find one person – there were conservation officers, searchers from the Appalachian Mountain Club, and volunteers from the Pemi Valley Search and Rescue Team checking many trails. The New Hampshire Army National Guard flew searchers to the summits and also conducted an aerial search. On Friday, searchers from six different organizations, including a K-9 team, set out looking for him. Thankfully, he was found by hikers on Friday evening. One hiker stayed with Staff, while another ran nearly 5 miles to get help. Around 10:25 p.m. on Friday night, Staff was reunited with his family, who had been looking for him for four days. Why do we dispatch people and helicopters and dogs and why do volunteers give up hours and days trying to find one person? **It's because of the value of people.** Sadly, we haven't yet reached the point where we value every human life the same way as God does.

The Gospels of Luke and Matthew include a story Jesus tells about a lost sheep. In Luke, Jesus tells the parable in response to critics who don't appreciate his eating with and spending time with sinners. In Matthew, the parable is presented in the context of a discussion about who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven and the need to care for those who are the least - the children and those on the margins. **Matthew states several times throughout his gospel that our response to and treatment of those who are “the little ones” or “the least” reveals the validity and truth of our faith or the hypocrisy and the emptiness of our faith.** The sheep that has gone astray represents something of value to its owner, just as each person is of value to God. Listen especially for what Jesus says about children and little ones in *Matthew 18:1-7, 10-14 (NRSV)* “At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you **change and become like children**, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever **becomes humble like this child** is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. **Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.** “If any of you put a stumbling block before **one of these little ones** who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. **Woe to the world** because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but **woe to the one** by whom the stumbling block comes!

**“Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones;** for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that **one of these little ones** should be lost.”

Judging by what some people who claim to be Christians say to other people, or on TV or post or share on social media I wonder if these people have never read these words or never heard them or just choose to ignore them. There are crises with “little ones” all over our nation and around the world. From poor rural areas to impoverished inner cities, from areas that are still recovering from hurricanes and floods to our southern border where many children in unsanitary and unsafe conditions; there are so many little ones who need love and care. At this moment, Venezuela has become the largest humanitarian crisis in the Western Hemisphere. Over 4 million men, women, and children have fled the country amidst economic collapse and instability. Children are particularly at risk for hunger and illness both inside Venezuela and in surrounding countries. Jesus says very plainly, **“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.** If any of you put a stumbling block before **one of these little ones** who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.” Do we believe that when we welcome a child, any child, we’re welcoming Christ? Or do we only welcome certain children? Do we understand that we’re putting ourselves in serious jeopardy if we’re a stumbling block for “one of these little ones?” Or do we think “these little ones” are not our responsibility and what Jesus says isn’t really true or doesn’t apply to us?

**God values people and wants us to do so as well.** We value and respect children and young people. We value people who may not be valued by society. We value people regardless of where they’re from. Do we care for and pursue people who are lost or hurt or broken as the shepherd Jesus describes in the parable?

A man named Sundar became a convert to Christianity and decided to stay in India to be a missionary and bear witness to Jesus. One late afternoon Sundar was traveling on foot high in the Himalayan Mountains with another man. It was bitter cold, and the night was coming on. His companion warned that they were in danger of freezing to death if they didn’t reach the monastery before darkness fell.

It so happened that as they crossed over a narrow path above a steep cliff, they heard a cry for help. Deep down in the ravine a man had fallen, and he lay injured. His leg was broken, and he couldn’t walk. His companion warned Sundar, “Don’t stop. God has brought this man to his fate. He must work it out by himself. That’s the tradition. Let us hurry on before we perish.” But Sundar

replied, "It's my tradition that God has brought me here to help my brother. I cannot abandon him." So the other man left Sundar and continued on through the snow, which had started to fall heavily.

Sundar climbed down to where the injured man was. Since the man had a broken leg, Sundar took a blanket from his knapsack and made a sling out of it. He got the man into it and hoisted him onto his back, then began the painful and arduous climb back up the path. After a long time, drenched with perspiration, he finally got back to the path, struggling to make his way through the increasingly heavy falling snow. It was dark now, and he had all he could do to find the path. But he persevered, and although faint from fatigue and overheated from exertion, he finally saw the lights of the monastery.

Then he nearly stumbled and fell. Not from weakness; he stumbled over an object lying in the path. He bent down on one knee and brushed the snow from the body of his companion who had frozen to death within sight of the monastery. And there, kneeling on one knee in the snow, he said aloud to himself the Scripture (*Luke 9:24*): "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." And he understood what Jesus meant and was glad that he had decided to "lose his life" for another.

Years later, when Sundar had his own disciples, they asked him this question: "Master, what is life's most difficult task?" How would you answer that question, "What is life's most difficult task?" Sundar's answer was, "**To have no burden to carry.**" Paul wrote in Galatians that we are to "bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." Part of that burden is not looking down upon or disregarding little ones; but helping to carry their burdens. Every person in this worship service is carrying burdens some of them are visible, most of them are not readily apparent but they're real and they're there for all of us. Since everyone has burdens, since we all have times we wander, perhaps we should ask ourselves, whose burden can I lighten?

A woman named Mary Ann Bird tells her story. "I grew up knowing that I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school my classmates made it clear to me how I must look to others; a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech. When my schoolmates would ask, "What happened to your lip?" I'd tell them I'd fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside of my family could love me.

There was, however, a teacher in the second grade whom we all adored – Mrs. Leonard. She was short, round, happy, a sparkling lady. Annually we would have a hearing test. I was virtually deaf in one ear; but when I had taken the test in past years, I discovered that if I did not press my hand as tightly upon my ears as I was instructed to do, I could pass the test. Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in class, and finally it was my turn.

I knew from past years, that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something and we would have to repeat it back...things like “The sky is blue,” or “Do you have new shoes?” I waited there for the words which God must have put in her mouth, those seven words which changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said in her whisper, “**I wish you were my little girl.**”

God has been whispering in our ears, sometimes into ears that we covered with our hands, sometimes into ears that were deaf to the whispers of the Lord saying to us, “I wish you were my little girl, I wish you were my little boy.” “I wish you would let me love you and that you would learn from me what life is all about.”

That’s why Jesus describes a shepherd who will leave 99 sheep to go after the one that is lost. Jesus’ audience was much more familiar with sheep than most of us. Growing up next to Boston I didn’t see a lot of sheep. The most sheep I’ve ever seen was when our family went on a trip to the United Kingdom. As we drove through the countryside, we saw thousands of sheep. Sometimes they were contained within the stonewall fences that stretched over the hills. Sometimes they had gotten out and were wandering dangerously close to or in the road. One of my favorite places was the ancient Roman fort, Housesteads, located in northern England along the wall Emperor Hadrian ordered built in 121 AD. Much of the countryside around the fort still looks much like it might have 1900 years ago, including the presence of grazing sheep. As we were climbing the long steep hill to the fort we started hearing two sheep; which turned out to be a mother sheep and one of its lambs. Greg thought it was funny because it sounded like the two sheep were saying, “Heeerre.” “Wheerre?” As they kept calling out the mother sheep seemed relaxed and steadily moved in the direction of the lamb. The young sheep kept bounding energetically over the little gulleys and dips in the ground, even crossing the path used by the people climbing the hill until it saw its mother and virtually tackled her as it started nursing. It was a beautiful picture of relationship and rejoicing. The whole time as they searched for each other they kept communicating with each other. “Heeerre.” “Wheerre?”

Through Jesus, God is calling, “Here,” to people who have gone astray, who are wandering around, asking, “Where?” Just as the lamb was looking to its mother for nurture and nourishment, so we turn to Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who leads us beside still waters and restores our soul.

There’s one part of this parable that troubles me. To leave 99 sheep in the mountains doesn’t make sense. What if an animal or robbers fall upon the unguarded 99? But the love of the shepherd is such that he is willing to put himself and the flock at risk to seek the lost. That’s what Jesus did. He put himself at risk to seek the little ones, the lost and the helpless. The image of God as a tender shepherd is a rich one in the Bible and is found in *Psalms 23, Isaiah 40 and 49, Ezekiel 34, and John 10.*

The shepherd goes after the sheep. That's what we are to do; it's what the church is to do – to take the initiative to find those who are lost; to care for the little ones. Finding, reaching, and helping those who are lost or “the little ones” gives pleasure to God and to all who value people. Every time there's a story about someone who is lost and found we get caught up in it whether it's someone like Christopher Staff who I told you about at the beginning of the sermon, or Amanda Eller, the hiker who was lost for more than two weeks in a Hawaiian forest.

Some of us know what it is like to get lost, to wander away from the path and to get hurt in the process and even to put other people at risk. Some of us may have run away from God and not known where we ended up or how to get out. God is searching for us even more diligently than with helicopters, State Police dog teams, search teams, lots of family members, friends, and volunteers. God's got Christ, the Holy Spirit, angels, and people on our trail. If we're lost, God will find us if we give the Lord a chance. God will also help us find others who are going astray. Every single person is of tremendous value to God, we know that by the length to which God has gone to show his love for us in Christ. We know it by what Jesus was willing to do and to endure for the sake of people like us. God is still calling “Heeerre” to anyone willing to ask “Wheerre?”

God is still looking for people to lovingly carry other people's burdens, for folks who by losing their lives for others will save their own.

God is still whispering in the ears of people, who will listen,

“I wish you were my little girl. I wish you were my little boy.”

I wish you would let me love you and that you would learn from me what life is all about.

God is searching for people who have compassion and concern for the lost. God is searching for people who will value and search for others, especially the littlest and the least.

Where are you?

**Prayer** Song Lover of the children By Ken Medema

Walking in the sunshine Laughing in the rain;

Lover of the children make me young again.

Climbing in the treetops, Running down the shore;

Lover of the children, make me young once more.

Vigorous and daring, teachable and mild;

Lover of the children, Make me like a child.

Trusting in your goodness Walking where you lead; Make me young indeed.

Make me young enough to know that alone I dare not Go through the darkness of the night. Make me young enough to see your love will never let me go.

Make me open to surprise, put wonder in my eyes, Make my vision clear and bright.

Make me willing to be led and to follow where you bid me go.

Fearing not tomorrow Trusting you today; Lover of the children make me young I pray.”

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. Why do you think the disciples ask Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” What might have been motivating them to ask that question? How does Jesus’ answer counter what most people think of when we think of greatness?
2. Review *Matthew 18:1-7, 10-14* and take note of every time Jesus uses the words “child,” “children,” and “these little ones.” How would you summarize in your own words what Jesus is saying about children?
3. What warning does Jesus give to all those who fail to treat “these little ones” properly? What does Christ say will happen to people who mistreat, disrespect, or abuse “these little ones?”
4. How do you think the words of Christ in *Matthew 18:1-14* are relevant in our nation and world today? What sorts of things would we be doing and not doing if we’re faithfully seeking to obey his teaching and heed his warning in these verses when it comes to caring for all children?
5. In the parable Jesus tells of the lost sheep and the shepherd, the shepherd takes the initiative to go and find the sheep. How can you be more intentional this coming week to share God’s love and compassion with your neighbors and with people you encounter?
6. What does *Matthew 18:1-14* teach us about the value of people? How can you better value people as God does, even “the little ones?” What might have to change about your attitude, your perspective, even how you consume information so that your life might more fully reflect the love and teaching of Christ?