

April 25, 2021

**“A Flock of Lost, Black, and Bummer Sheep”**

Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake

*Acts 4:5-11*

*The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’*

*Luke:15:4-6*

*“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.’*

*John 10:14-18*

*I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”*

**Sermon “A Flock of Lost, Black, and Bummer Sheep”**

I was left scratching my head this week when I read the scriptures for today in the common lectionary. The lectionary, if you aren't familiar with it, is a collection of pre-selected scriptures meant to take you through our collective story of faith in an orderly fashion over a three year period and it is shared by most of the mainline denominations.

Usually each Sunday it presents some kind of theme, but I had no idea what Sheep and rejected stones had in common. Then I was watching a TV show that talked about Bummer lambs and I

started seeing a connection. Bummer lambs are lambs, that for some reason or another, their mother's have rejected them, they won't feed them and without intervention they will die.

So the bummers are taken into a good shepherd's home and bottle fed. The shepherd will hold the lamb close to their heart as they feed them, close enough to hear the shepherd's heart beat. Then when it is old enough to be weaned the lamb rejoins the flock.

Something I found particularly moving is that after that when the shepherd goes to call the sheep in it is the bummer lambs that come running first. Their love and devotion far exceeds all others in the flock because of that special connection the sheep have to the good shepherd that saved them from being rejected.

I don't know about you but I was definitely a bummer lamb, a rejected stone, a black sheep and a lost sheep all rolled into one when I came into the UCC. Rejected by the faith of my childhood and at the time not welcome in any other mainline denomination in Christianity.

It was ten years from the time I was broken and brought to my knees by that rejection until I returned to a church, and during that entire time I had no idea that there was even a church that existed that would welcome me. And I know, like that Bummer lamb, that my deep devotion to the UCC comes from the healing I gained by being taken in when others rejected me.

My story is unique in that I found a faith community where I belonged but there are so many people who aren't so lucky.

I want to expand this idea of radical welcome beyond the LGBTQA folk to people of color, to people with disabilities, to divorced people, to low or no income people, people who question the myths, to all the black sheep, the bummer sheep, and the lost sheep. I want them to feel what I felt, that healing balm of love and acceptance that is offered here.

Jesus taught us that it's the rejected ones who should be the cornerstone of the community we build together in the future. The cornerstone that the other builders rejected. He showed us through scripture that we should not just care about the lost sheep of the world, not just make a place where they feel welcome but to go after them, to hunt them down and bring them back to the fold. So that they know that they matter, they have value, even if they are different.

You all know this, you were well on your way when I arrived on the scene of making real Jesus's vision of the beloved community. His community that was full of stinky fishermen, much hated tax collectors, thieves, despised women of ill repute, the unclean, the unwashed, the shunned lepers, the poor widows, dispossessed, and formally possessed. But we have so much to do yet.

In my work at the hospital and when I attend 12 step meetings I am privileged to hear people's stories. Over and over again I hear this, now this is important, I hear "I still believe in God but I don't believe in organized religion".

This repeated mantra of the unchurched is a banner that they live under and this standard was created by the failure of the Church universal to make them feel valued, to make them feel welcomed, to make them feel the presence of God in their walls and in themselves. But it gets worse, the Church universal has also wounded them, spiritually and left their soul scarred by the rejection they have felt and they still do it every day!

It signals the failure of Christianity to be the community that Jesus taught us to be. I have heard so many reasons why the church failed them and why they left. Here are just a few: “They were all about the money,” “They wouldn’t let me take communion because I am divorced.”, “The pastor ran off with the treasurer”, “They wouldn’t let my Mom be buried in the cemetery because she took her own life”, “I was abused by the pastor”, “I don’t believe all those fairy tales in the bible”, “They’re all hypocrites”, “My Mother was sick and no one visited her and the pastor never came to the hospital.” “The Church is too patriarchal, they are all sexists”, “I just always felt judged and Jesus said we aren’t supposed to judge one another.”

Though we have the lectionary in common, the practice of unconditional love and acceptance, the practice of extravagant welcome for all God’s people is still uncommon.

There is a part of me and I think all of you too, that has been chomping at the bits from this pandemic. I want us to get to return to our full strength when it’s time and see what we can build together in the future. I intuitively believe in my bones that we are like all the bulbs and buds out there that are getting ready to burst into blossom.

I know all the reasons that make it seem like that’s impossible. I know that memories of how it used to be still hang in the air here. Good memories, to be sure, but when it comes to envisioning our future, look away from the past and ask the Good Shepherd what the plan is now at this moment in time?

Who does the Good Shepherd want us to find and bring back into the fold? Who needs us to hunt them down and save them from the wolves. Who is hungry and abandoned? Who are the cornerstones for our church in the future?

I put some stones out there in the entryway on a table and if you haven’t already I want you to pick one up and stick it in your pocket for a while. I want it to remind you to ask yourself and to ask the Good Shepherd in prayer. “Do I know somebody who is a lost, or a black sheep or bummer sheep?”, “What would happen if I asked them to church?”, “Could they become one of the cornerstones of our church in the future?”

In my opinion reaching out should never be about increasing our numbers or holding onto the members that we have. It should always be about continuing the mission of our Shepherd to create a better world where everyone feels loved by God and Neighbor. A place that Spirit can call home. A place where your Spirit feels at home and one with God.

May we all feel like we belong to this flock, may we show who our shepherd is in all that we do. We all know what rejection feels like, we all have been those bummer sheep. May we all feel God's presence enfold us like that shepherd, may we feel protected and nurtured and fed and close enough to God to hear God's heart beat love for us and extend that love everywhere we go. AMEN

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