

## ***“Nibbling Our Way Away”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

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James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

### **Luke 15:1-10**

*15:1 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."*

*15:3 So he told them this parable:*

*15:4 "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.*

*15:8 "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**

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 Loving God to whom being lost is worse than being dead!

When one soul is found there is cause for a party across the heavens and on earth.

*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."*

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 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 nibble 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 discover 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 lostness

is when fear and despair, anxiety and inner doubt creep in and take up residence.

Jesus the Good Shepherd uses sheep as a metaphor for the humanity He loves so much.

He understands that human nature is eerily similar.

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.

I'll use myself as an example.

As you know, I am a recovering addict.

But I never started out to become one.

35 years ago one nibble led to another

and suddenly I could not imagine engaging in social  
interactions with my peers

without my crutch of drugs and alcohol.

I was lost and alone and far from home when I found myself  
in deep, deep trouble.

My personal faith journey out of lost-ness

began the moment I heard my family and church say  
in unison,

*“James, we love you. Come home.”*

In that sacred moment I went from knowing about Jesus to  
knowing Jesus;

from knowing what the Church should do

to knowing what the Church would do.

You and I know well that today’s drugs of choice

are infinitely more addictive and difficult to shake and  
break than ever before.

The genesis, however, is 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 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**

In his book entitled The Trivialization of God (c. 1995)

Donald McCullough tells about the time he went to Scotland

to begin a doctorate at Edinburgh University.

Donald McCullough went to Scotland a few weeks in advance of his family

in order to find housing. We overhear his story in his words:

“...Having some time to myself, I attended a concert at Usher Hall.

It was a delightful evening -- until the performance ended and I walked out into a very rainy night.

I hadn't taken an umbrella; I hadn't even taken a raincoat.

Not to worry, I told myself,

because I could run back to my room before I even got too soaked.

“So with confidence bolstered by complete ignorance,

I raced off through the dark streets.

The rain fell with increasing conviction, everything became more unfamiliar,

and fear formed like a ball in my guts and rose,

regardless of my efforts to keep it down,

into my consciousness, gnawing at my courage.

Eventually, as W.C. Fields put it, I had to take the bull by the tail

and face the situation: I was outrageously lost.

I needed help, but even muggers and stray cats had quit the night.

I wandered aimlessly, despairingly.

“A man appeared.

What [rendezvous] had sent him in such inhospitable circumstances?

Do angels speak with a Scottish accent?

Whoever he was, I needed him.

*“Sir, can you help me find the way to...the Residence Halls [at Edinburgh]?”*

*“Aye, you need to go three blocks down this street,  
and then turn on Clerk for two streets, go for two  
streets, then turn right.”*

He stopped when he saw the confusion on my face.

*“Och,” he said, “I’ll show you. Follow me.”*

Donald McCullough reflects on this experience and writes:

“In the moments that followed

I had perhaps the purest form of faith I had ever  
experienced:

I entrusted myself totally to this man's  
guidance.

I dedicated not a fleeting second of thought to my watery  
appearance,

my fearful panting, my confused speech -- or my trust  
in this stranger.

At the time, my faith seemed -- and was! -- completely  
unremarkable;

my attention was devoted exclusively to my savior,  
to what he was saying and where he was going.

Authentic Christian faith is blind in this way.

It is necessary for the knowledge of a personal God;

only in trust do we receive the divine revelation given  
to us in Jesus Christ...

Salvation...comes only by looking up and taking the hand  
of the One who can lift us into an understanding of  
God.”

### **Nibbling our way away**

Long after having heard this message from Jesus' lips,  
St. Peter was taking a stroll through Heaven's golden  
streets

when he saw a stranger in Heaven,  
someone who he had not seen come in  
through the pearly gates.

As Peter was about to approach and accost this stranger,  
another new face turned the corner...and then  
another, and another after her.

St. Peter realized that there must be a hole in the fence,  
so he walked the entire way around heaven until, indeed,  
he found a gap in the wall.

And there was a figure, bent over,  
helping people to sneak into the kingdom of God!

Well, St. Peter was about to use all his authority and power  
to lambaste this individual when the person turned  
around  
and Peter recognized that it was Jesus.

Jesus said, *"I'm sorry, Peter, I know this is against the rules.  
I know these people are sinners  
and have only recently repented and confessed their  
faith.*

*I know that these people by all the rules and regulations  
maybe should not be here.*

*But, Peter, these are my friends,  
and I want them in."*

My friends, this is what the love of God does:

- knows us from before we were born,
- fills us with the Holy Spirit at our baptisms,
- commissions us to be Christ-like in all of the arenas of our lives,
- gives us direction and guidance,
- nurtures us in the changing scenes of life,
- sends us out from this sanctuary to do ministry wherever God plants us,
- tells us to seek and find and welcome home the lost and

afraid,

--and then, if and when we run into difficulties,

get lost, lose our way,

lose our hopes and visions for a brighter  
tomorrow,

and cannot seem to find our way out of a  
paper bag,

God graciously seeks us out,

finds us, invites us to come  
home,

and says, "*Och. I'll  
show you. Follow me.*"

Go, and do likewise.

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