

A Community of Grace

Matt 18: 10-20, Romans 13:1-10

If you've ever lived in a small town, you'll recognise the setting for this story as a tight-knit community, where people are used to having to work together for mutual benefit. Take the town's sheep-fold, for example. Sheep from several households were kept safe there overnight. On most mornings, they'd be guided out by the nominated shepherds, for grazing together on the common land. We all knew how it was done, so when Jesus used the everyday illustration of a wandering sheep, our minds automatically filled in the details. It might have been something like this...

As my cousin Joshua says, shepherding isn't a top shelf job. Not much scope if you're ambitious, but there's mateship among shepherds, guiding their animals through the sparse grazing land. With no fences to mark safe boundaries, you had to keep the sheep away from dangerous edges. And of course you kept an eye out for signs of predators, perhaps tracks or droppings that would show wolves had been in the area. It reminds me of working on primary school holiday-care excursions; Each adult leader is allocated five or six children to keep tabs on, but it's a collective responsibility, and if one of the children has higher needs, you help each other out.

One day, the story goes, the shepherds are about to head home when Joshua realises he's missing one of his household's animals. Most sheep more-or-less stick together, but little Black-ear was the adventurous type. For him, the grass was always greener on the other side of the ravine...

Joshua's heart beat faster with anxiety. He knows what to do; he leaves his sheep with the main group, and tells the other shepherds, 'If I don't catch you up by sunset, drop my lot back at the sheep-fold with yours, will you? And could someone go past my house and tell Rebekah I'll be a bit late today?'

Back at Joshua's home, the women get on with the evening routines. Rebekah feeds the children, secures the hen-house, and so on. But she always has half an eye towards the hills, anxiously hoping to see Joshua coming into view, leading the stray sheep. And just on dark, she spots them coming over the rise. She quickly sends word around the village; It's ok, they're home safely. Black-ear had wandered off and got lost, but now he's home with the others. Everything's fine. Everyone's happy. Great relief.

Now, Black-ear was no great shakes. There's no suggestion that he was about to win Best-in-Show. But Jesus uses an unremarkable sheep to make that very point. He had just demonstrated to his disciples the importance to God of the 'little ones', by using the example of a young child, very probably a girl. Back then, children too young to work were not considered important. When they can take on household responsibility, then they become useful. But Jesus tells us that God holds such 'little ones' to be of special value, just for themselves. He has stronger words to highlight the gravity of offence committed by those who harm a child than he uses about any other behaviour.

It seems God values people differently from how the world did then. Who do we value?

In some places, churches have been known to seek out ‘desirable’ members. In my youthful days, when my friendship group were travelling widely, a good friend went to work in the UK for a few years. She joined a landmark church, which met in an old, historic-listed building. Like many churches around London, they had a structural problem with the ageing roof and steeple. This was more than fixing the op-shop electrics, or re-jigging church office spaces. Theirs was a seriously expensive problem. It was well beyond their means to fix. The leadership of that church, which included several prominent citizens, calculated that the financial target could be met if they recruited x number of new members with good incomes, who each committed to give x pounds per week. They actually launched an evangelistic campaign targeting a nearby university and other places where people from a selection of well-paid occupations habitually gathered. The church had limited space for some of the planned big-name evangelistic events, so they had to be selective. (‘Targeted’ they called it.) My friend became increasingly uncomfortable with the valuing of some converts over others. I don’t know how the campaign ended, but I found myself rather hoping it would fail. It deserved to fail.

Jesus talks of bringing in lost sheep, smelly bits and all, from wherever you find them. In fact, the ‘little ones’ are of special importance. That term ‘little ones’ wasn’t used only for children; it could mean green recruits to a rabbi’s team of followers. It was used for those who don’t know enough, or can’t do enough, to be generally wanted. Consciously seeking out those in need and accepting all comers might mean developing some tolerance. But there’s a sound basis for making the effort to build a community regardless of people’s attractiveness. The foundation is that God shows un-earned, and generous, grace to all of us. Acceptance and mutual love, such as St. Paul also describes, will show in the way we play this contact sport called ‘church life.’ For example, it’s to be expected that we’ll see a considerable range in the things we think are important. For some Christians, decorations like flowers and liturgical items have a special place; they’re creative arts, for aiding worship, and they reflect God’s creation. Or perhaps significant days and anniversaries, or milestones in the church’s year, are key. Other people, no less committed to Jesus, may simply not notice those things. And I’ve seen these differences cause more upset than they need to.

When we lived in Melbourne, we had a church lady who by long tradition marked a special memorial day by giving and placing a giant vase of somewhat extravagant flowers in the sanctuary. It was her gift. In that same church was a newcomer, who was unaware of this tradition. She had a bit of spare time on her hands so, wanting to be useful, she had taken to checking the church during the week to tidy it up for the following Sunday. The building was a bit multi-purpose so she’d remove debris left by the many children and also set up the front area, throw out dead flowers and so on.

On this particular week she was in a bit of a hurry. She could have sorted out the flowers and re-vamped last Sunday's display, but seeing that some of them were dead it seemed easier just to ditch the lot. They went in the skip.

The following Sunday, the devoted flower donor was puzzled. 'Didn't they last?' she persistently asked the poor minister. He had a fair idea what had happened. -He'd seen the evidence in the skip that morning. He had carefully concealed it by putting other things on top. He told the lady, quite truthfully, that the flowers hadn't lasted. And he gently advised the newcomer not to mention it. He knew enough of the personalities involved to judge that there would be more heat generated than light. Blessèd are the peace-makers.

There are all sorts of times in life when we have the choice to be discreet about other people's stuff-ups, or not. It probably is a situation that clergy are in more than anyone else, but for all of us the choice to refrain from rubbing people's noses in their own messes will come up from time to time. And where one member has directly transgressed against another, if it can be sorted out between the pair, that's the end of it. The aim is always restoration of relationships, not the winning of an argument.

I think navigating life is something we get better at as we get older. Like many of us here, just looking around, I've been a Christian long enough to have been forgiven a lot. And that can make us more willing to play the other part.

Knowing God's mercy and blessing, churches are to be communities that both welcome diverse people in and treat one another with the love Jesus shows us. May we show ongoing grace and warm acceptance in our life together. And let our church be always open to share Jesus with all those who are searching for life's meaning.

Amen