

One in a Hundred

A Message for Worship on Sunday Morning
The 1st Sunday of Lent
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
February 18, 2018
Text: Matthew 18:12-14

I've been in a lot of meetings this past week. Have you ever had a week like that, with meeting after meeting, appointment after appointment? You get to Friday and realize the week is just a blur of faces and words, words, words. Spoken, written, face to face, over the phone, in text messages, by email – the words just fly at you, tumbling over themselves in their need to be heard or read, processed and comprehended. It can be overwhelming! It *is* overwhelming yet somehow, some things still stick out. Such was the case for me, this week. Perhaps I am remembering only one in a hundred of all the words that came at me, but those words – like the people who sent them my way – really matter. That's why they stuck.

Like on Monday, I was struck by the questions which some of Peter's students came up with during my appearance in the 7th grade English classes to provide some broader insights into Islam as they read a book set in Afghanistan. What I was presenting to them was truly new information, and most of them were really interested. They asked good questions and they listened to the answers. We had a real conversation in every class. What

surprised me most was that every class was different because the students were such individuals that their questions made for very different conversations. They reminded me that everyone has their own story, their own reality which frames the way they encounter the world each day.

On Tuesday, my day began with the monthly meeting of the BNN, the Basic Needs Network of Westerly-Pawcatuck. This is an extraordinary group of folks, the only one like it I have encountered anywhere in New England. It is a compendium of human service agencies whose representatives come to this meeting for the sole purpose of networking with each other. I always come away from these meetings having learned something meaningful and important from these folks on the front lines working to help those living at or beyond the margins of society.

Thursday found me at a UCC clergy association meeting which took place at the Mathewson Street Church in downtown Providence. Mathewson Street was one of the work sites we visited on our two Providence Experience Mission Trips so some of you are familiar with the incredible work they do with the homeless population in Providence. Jack Jones, the pastor, has been passionate about the issue of homelessness and the lack of affordable housing for as long as I've known him which is why he's the perfect pastor for this church. He's also come up with an exciting new initiative to address the affordable housing issue in

particular that will be the focus of one of our Blessing Moments this Lent. What I most recall about Thursday's meeting was Jack's runaway enthusiasm for his new idea and the wet blanket comments a few of our colleagues hurled his way. Positive words laden with hope and excitement crashed headlong into skepticism and critique but Jack was unfazed which is exactly why the world needs more people like this man. Imagine what we could do with a hundred of him to every one nay-sayer! It boggles the mind.

In between these two days fell Wednesday, an odd duck day this year with two contradictory events – Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day – coinciding within it. This day found me at yet another meeting, this one with the Westerly-Pawcatuck Clergy Association – a word loving bunch if ever there was one. After our usual business meeting luncheon, this time at the hospital cafeteria, we trudged on over to administration so that we could all get “badged” for the Yale New Haven Health System. Yale decided we were all to be badged as “Community Clergy,” a wonderful recognition of our work in their midst. What I most remember from that day is the young woman assigned to create my badge. She was new to the job and very nervous. Once she heard my title of “Rev.” she called me that for the rest of the time we spent together. “Rev, do you want to see the photo? Rev, can I help you get that into the badge holder? You have a nice day now, Rev.” Between you and me, I think I was the first woman pastor

she'd ever met and she was thrilled. Four other women were badged as "Rev" that day right behind me and by the time we left she was smiling so much I thought her face would break! Rev. Funny what a difference one word can make.

But then, of course, something else happened on that Wednesday. Something awful. Another school shooting. Another encounter with the unthinkable. Another day with our television screens filled with sobbing, hysterical parents and kids. Another day with words, barbed and angry words, flying around filling the air with anguish and pain at the horror of yet another instance of needless loss of life. Another day where dreadful numbers filled the news – AR 15; 17 dead; 19 year old shooter. Words of condolence were met with cries of "do something!" Seemingly once again those cries fell on deaf ears. Anger, frustration, confusion combined with grief may lead somewhere at last. Maybe. Hopefully. Words cried in anguish must be heard....

Words. Numbers. They come at us all the time, every day. They come at us at work, at home, even in our sleep. They are relentless, just like life. Sometimes it feels like our heads will explode and our hearts will break. But, they don't. They don't because we can't let them. We can't give in too long to fear or worry or anxiety or any of those emotions that pull us down, that keep us from moving forward. But, they wear on us. They truly do. We get tired. We get numb. We just want it all to stop. We

want never to hear about another mass shooting again. We want people to stop being afraid of anyone who's even a little bit different from them. We want everyone to have a home to rest in at night and food to eat on the dinner table. We want the chance to be, just be, the people, the persons God created us to be – happy, healthy, safe, secure and worry-free. This is what we want! And this is what we will never have for the simple reason that this is just not the way the world works. People are people, the world is the world and sometimes ... sometimes ... life just stinks.

So, then what? Well, believe it or not, that's what Jesus was trying to explain with this short little parable we read from Matthew's Gospel this morning. Jesus uses the metaphor of a shepherd going out to look for the one lost sheep leaving the 99 behind as a way of explaining the nuances of God's love for us in the midst of life's challenges. To see these nuances and how they apply to us who know little if anything about herding sheep, it is helpful to be aware of a few things. First is that shepherds are good at finding lost sheep. They have to be because sheep are very easily distracted and prone to just wondering off. But even more important to this particular parable is the fact that in Jesus' time flocks such as this one were often communal flocks tended by more than one shepherd. This communal nature of tending the flocks is what made it possible for the one shepherd to leave the 99 other sheep to look for the one that was lost. There had to

have been other shepherds already in place to keep track of the 99 otherwise the first shepherd would get back with the found sheep only to have to go back out and look for 10 more who had wandered off while he was gone looking for the first one! This parable rang true in Jesus' time because of the common understanding that all the sheep were everyone's responsibility. Yes, one shepherd goes out to look for the one that's lost but he can do that because the other shepherds were there to help. The shepherd who searched might have searched alone, but he was not a shepherd alone. His community made it possible for the one lost sheep to be found.

Interesting to note also is that this same parable also appears in Luke but with a different emphasis. In Luke, the emphasis is on the rejoicing when the lost sheep is found and returned. In Matthew, the version we read this morning, the emphasis is on not losing the sheep in the first place. "So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost." Yes, there is rejoicing when the shepherd returns with the lost sheep, as one would expect. But, Matthew is clear that the real point of the parable is that God does not want even one sheep to be lost. Each and every sheep is important to the shepherd just like each and every person is important to God. Everyone matters to God. Every single person. No one is more important than anyone else. No one is more deserving of a good life, of happiness, of good

health, of a place to live and food to eat than anyone else.

Everyone matters to God. Every single person.

Also important to realize is that God does not blame people when life gets tough. God does not blame people who lose their homes because the money coming in doesn't line up with the money needing to go back out. God doesn't blame people when they lose their jobs or get injured at work or in a car accident. We humans do that, all too quickly, but God doesn't. God's love is unconditional always. But, God helps those who help themselves, we're quick to say. Gosh, I hope not because then we're all in trouble because none of us are up to life's challenges alone. God helps those who ask for help. God helps those who need. God helps those who hurt. God helps. God loves. Without reservation and without condition. God expects the same of us.

That's what this parable tells us. Nowhere in this parable does the shepherd say to the lost sheep, "what a stupid sheep you are for wondering away and getting caught in those vines! You're lucky I came to get you! Don't you ever do that again, you bad sheep." Nope. The shepherd doesn't scold the sheep for getting lost. The shepherd doesn't judge the sheep for wandering away. The shepherd doesn't threaten never to help the sheep again. The shepherd just looks for that one sheep, leaving the other 99 in the care of the rest of his community while he does. Because the one sheep matters just as much as every one of the other 99 who

didn't wander off, who didn't get in trouble. At least on this day. And that's as it should be because on another day it will be a different one of the 100 who gets in trouble. Maybe #12 will get sick. Maybe #57 will get distracted by a butterfly and fall into a ditch. Maybe #35 will get snagged on a thorny bush. It doesn't matter to the shepherd who needs help or why. It only matters that help is needed.

One in a hundred. One sheep out of a hundred needed help and the shepherd came through, without hesitation or reservation. One hundred percent of the time the love needed was there without question. Such is God's reality for us and such is our challenge as faithful members of God's beloved community. We are the shepherds of God's beloved community, called to help however we can when one of the sheep is in trouble. But, we can't possibly take care of everything, we think, and that's true. We can't possibly take care of all the need that we see even in our own community each day. Dear friends, God isn't asking us to fix these systemic problems once and for all. But God is asking us, expecting us, to do something. God is expecting us to try. We certainly can't do everything that needs to be done. But we can do something, like doing what we can for people trying to make a new start with a place to live. Maybe we can only help one in a hundred when it's all said and done. But for that one, imagine the rejoicing! And, then, we can go for two. Amen.