

Rev. Dr. Yugo Suzuki's Sermon

9/12/10 **The Parable of a Lost Sheep: What Does It Mean? Luke 15: 1-7**

Many of you know the parable of the lost sheep. It was read this morning for our scripture lesson. What meaning can we find in this well-known parable?

In Jesus' time, the Pharisees insisted that what made human life truly human was rigid observance of the religious laws. They looked down upon common folks who did not or could not adhere to the laws. They called them sinners.

Jesus' attitude was entirely different. He freely mingled with them. He ate with them. Jesus even spent a night at the home of one of them. This unconventional attitude of Jesus must have been a source of disgruntlement of the Pharisees against him. "This fellow welcomes sinners and even eats with them."

The parable of the lost sheep was Jesus' rebuttal to this criticism.

A shepherd is taking care of 100 sheep in the field. One of them gets lost. The shepherd leaves the 99 sheep in the field and spends countless hours looking for the lost sheep.

When he finally finds it, the shepherd takes it home joyfully and prepares a banquet to celebrate its return.

The message of the parable is two-fold. One, the Pharisees do not reflect the will of God. The Pharisees reject the despised, whereas God accepts them. The Pharisees' love is exclusionary, whereas God's love is inclusive.

Then, two, the parable makes abundantly clear that what makes human life truly human is not strict observance of the laws. What makes human life truly human is generosity toward one another, especially the weak and the have-nots, because God is love. God is our shepherd.

Now we can understand why the parable of the lost sheep is meant for us as well. Again the message is two-fold.

One, it compels us to confess that we often behave like the Pharisee in the episode. We expect God to despise those whom we despise. We assume God will exclude those whom we exclude. We often create God in our own image. We are modern day Pharisees.

Then, two, it makes abundantly clear to us that the core of humanity consists of generosity, compassion, and love, because God is infinitely generous, unbelievably compassionate, and incredibly loving.

That is to say, the parable of the lost sheep demands we choose Jesus' way over the Pharisee's way. It calls us to meet this challenge head on everyday.

That is a tall order. Are you discouraged? Are you anxious? Well, you shouldn't be, because Jesus is our shepherd. He walks with us every step of the way. He empowers us to face the challenge with courage and hope.

If we trust in Jesus Christ, the challenge ceases to be a threat, a source of anxiety. It becomes a calling - calling to live joyfully and lovingly in the world with Jesus, our shepherd. He comes to us. He carries us on his shoulder and takes us home.

Thanks be to God.