

99 sheep grazing in a field; 99 sheep doing what they should do where they should do it; 99 out of 100, far better than a passing grade, but for the shepherd nothing less than 100 out of 100 will do; the search is on!

Imagine we are those 99 sheep: “Have you heard? The shepherd is gone!” “Where did he go?” “He went looking for Murphy.” “Murphy!” “Yes, Murphy!” “Again? That’s the third time this week! How many times is he going to save him?” “You know, if Murphy would start making some different choices, he wouldn’t get himself into these messes! He only has himself to blame.” “I know! It’s not fair! Why should one sheep get all the attention? The shepherd should take care of the 99! Murphy’s made his choices. He got himself lost; he should find his own way back!”

Luke 15:1–2 (NRSV) Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

The last time Israel grumbled against God, it was right after Moses led them through the Red Sea; that generation was lost in the wilderness. Now, the one greater than Moses has come, and the people of God are again grumbling. How about us? Messiah has come for us; we’re the one; and, we are the 99. Are we grumbling when the one is cared for at the expense of the many? Are we grumbling, or do our hearts jump for joy when we see that sweaty shepherd come staggering up the hill, Murphy on his shoulders, with the biggest grin on his face shouting through his gasps, *Luke 15:6 (NRSV) ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’*

✦ Lost in the Dark

How did it come to this? Turn the clock back to the night before: 100 sheep grazing in a field; 99 sheep are doing what they should do where they should do it, but there’s always that one. Murphy didn’t mean to be a problem, but no matter how hard he tried, it seemed like if it could go wrong, it did go wrong. He couldn’t catch a break; but he sure could catch heat.

This time, he thought he was rolling in clover. It smelled so good; it tasted terrific! He couldn’t stop chewing, until he heard the comments; usually, he tuned them out, but maybe his good mood had lowered his defenses; “Someone needs to chew more and eat less.” “How come he gets clover and all I get is crabgrass?” “Flowers should be shared by all not be a feast for one!”

He tried to tune them out; he tried to have a thick skin, but the words cut him to the quick. He lost his appetite. He didn't care about clover. He didn't care about anything. “Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me;” he wished. The truth is the names did hurt, and he had had enough. He ran. He didn't know which way. He didn't know where he was going. He just wanted to get away.

Who knows how long he ran that night? Who knows how far? When exhaustion finally overcame the pain, he looked around at a place he did not know. He had no idea how he'd gotten there. He had no idea how to get back. He was afraid, alone, and lost in the dark.

Then the voices returned: “I should've been stronger.” “I shouldn't have let them get to me.” “This is my fault. I deserve this.”

We hear about the 99 and the one; and we blame the one: His choices, his mistakes, his sin, his fault. He made his bed and he deserves to lie in it – afraid, alone, lost in the dark.

We blame the one and do not question ourselves – our choices, our mistakes, our sin. Have we been so zealous in defending what is right that we've forgotten the times when we were the one, we were afraid, alone, and lost in the dark? Have we been so focused on preserving good against evil that we've lost our capacity to care? Do we justify our behavior at the expense of the one who's gone astray?

Everything changes when we question our assumptions; anything can happen when we stop being so sure of what we know and start wondering what we can learn. All things are possible when we stop grumbling about how good they've got it and start savoring how sweet it is for us.

We just may find our way; we just may find the Way; he's been looking for us; he's ready to take us home; he won't stop searching for us; he knows we're afraid, alone, and lost in the dark.

✦ Found Far Afield

99 sheep grazing in a field; 99 sheep grumbling and mumbling about a lost sheep and a missing shepherd; 99 sheep who focus only on this field and cannot see the one found far afield.

Driving home from the grocery store on September 12, I found myself behind an old SUV. Emblazoned on its rear door was a bumper sticker – Since 2001, terrorists have killed 3000 Americans; abortionists kill 4000 Americans every day.

So, abortionists are worse than terrorists? Women who make that choice are like members of al Qaeda? We should declare war on abortion?

Now, imagine that you are a woman facing that terrible choice. You are pregnant. You are not married. You know you've done wrong. You're not sure what to do. You feel lost and far afield. Would you turn to the driver of that SUV for support? Would you come near to listen to them?

Sinners and tax collectors were coming near to listen to Jesus. The holiest man who ever walked the earth was attractive to men and women whose choices and lifestyle violated God's law; they were sinners; their actions are not excused or justified in this parable or in Scripture in general. *Matthew 9:13 (NRSV) Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."*

Jesus' second parable to these sinners gives us another glimpse of what God is like and a clue as to what made Jesus so attractive. One writer put it this way:

The parable [of the lost coin] also points our attention to the woman's actions as an illustration of God's activity to find and embrace those who are "lost." Other parables may compare God to kings, noblemen, and landowners. Here, however, God looks like a person just doing what she can. No extraordinary talents. No special training. No obvious privileges. Nobody larger than life.

God looks like someone who shows patient commitment....[someone like Antoinette Tuff]

[On a Tuesday] 20-year-old Michael Hill walked into Ronald E McNair Discovery Learning Academy in Decatur, Georgia, with an AK-47-style assault rifle, 500 rounds of ammunition and "nothing to live for".

With 870 children inside aged between five and 11 years and Hill confessing that he had not been taking his psychiatric medication, the nation was, in all likelihood, staring down the barrel of yet another horrific school shooting.

Luckily for everybody, Hill took as his hostage the school bookkeeper, Antoinette Tuff. [What followed](#) was an amazing illustration of calm and brinkmanship by Tuff – [all recorded on her call to emergency services](#) – during which she managed to successfully negotiate between Hill and the police.

"We're not going to hate you," she said, referring to him first as "sir" and later as "sweetie" and "baby". "My pastor, he just started this teaching on anchoring, and how you anchor yourself in the Lord," [recalled Tuff](#), who said she was terrified. "I just sat there and started praying."

And so in between updates with the 911 dispatcher she shared her own travails with Hill, telling him about her divorce and disabled son, all the while reassuring him. "I love you. I'm proud of you. We all go through something in life. You're gonna be OK. Sweetheart. I tried to commit suicide last year after my husband left me." Eventually, while keeping police at a distance, she persuaded him to give up his weapons, lie on the floor and give himself up.¹

With no choice but to be present to someone who was -- on that day, at least -- very lost, she lit a lamp and bravely started sweeping, saying: "I can help you. Let's see if we can work it out so that you don't have to go away with them [the police] for a long time."

Then, as the crisis came to a bloodless end, she soothed him: "It's gonna be all right, sweetheart. I just want you to know that I love you, though, OK? And I'm proud of you. That's a good thing that you're just giving up and don't worry about it. We all go through something in life."

That's what it sounds like when God becomes present to someone who is lost. Thank you for showing us, Ms. Tuff.

And thank you for giving us a chance to experience some joy with you. May it extend even to the guy who put down his gun;² a guy who was lost and found far afield.

99 out of 100 is not enough for our Good Shepherd. He wants us all – no matter what we've done, no matter where we are. He wants us all, and He is looking for us; He is looking for them too. Stop grumbling. Start searching. Serve the Shepherd and join in the joy, "My sheep was lost and is found! My coin was lost and is found! Rejoice with me! Rejoice with me! Amen."

¹ Gary Young, "The Heroism of Antoinette Tuff Reveals What's Missing in Politics."

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/25/antoinette-tuff-heroism-missing-from-politics>

² Matthew Skinner, "I Know What God Looks Like." <http://www.odysseynetworks.org/news/2013/09/06/i-know-what-god-looks-like-luke-151-10>

¹ Timothy 1:12-17; Psalm 14:1-7; Luke 15:1-10