

99 Sheep and a Pocket Full of Pennies

Luke 15:1-10

September 16, 2007

I love John Wayne movies. Last year Toni gave me a set of DVDs for Christmas that included “Flying Tigers,” “The Sands of Iwo Jima,” “The Fighting Kentuckian,” “In Old California,” and “North to Alaska.” I also have “The Undefeated” which starred Wayne and Rock Hudson.

I made what I consider a great purchase a couple of weeks ago. I was browsing the movie bin at Wal-Mart and found a four DVD set of John Wayne movies for five bucks. Twenty movies in all...and they only cost me five bucks. Never mind that they were all made back in the thirties and the acting back then really wasn't very good. This was John Wayne. The set of DVDs did contain “McClintock” which was a pretty good movie and worth the money by itself. A week before that, I spent five bucks on one John Wayne movie – “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance.” That was a great show. It starred, in addition to Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, Lee Marvin, Vera Miles, and Strother Martin.

One of the movies on my new DVD is “The Angel and the Bad Man.” John Wayne, the hero of course, get shot, falls off his horse, and is still able to hit a bad guy on a galloping horse with one shot from his pistol. That sort of fits our stereotyped picture of the old west, but reality was much different. Pistols back then, were not very accurate unless you were really close.

Now, I've never been shot, but I bet it hurts. If you are in pain, I doubt that you have much of a chance to hit the broad side of a barn with a pistol, let alone a man on a galloping horse at seventy-five yards.

But there is a whole lot of stuff in movies that doesn't happen in real life. A few years ago, Stephen Segal starred in “Fire Down Under.” He had a showdown with the bad guys at a gas station. Of course, there was gasoline spilling out all over the ground until the villain was standing in it. He was smoking a cigarette which Segal shot out of his hand. It landed in the pool of gasoline and it exploded in a huge fireball. In reality, it doesn't work that way.

An expert the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms was engaged in some arson research. So many times, arson fires are explained as accidents. You know, a suspect will claim that his girlfriend was smoking a cigarette when he accidentally threw gas on her and she exploded. So, researchers at ATF started throwing lighted cigarettes into cans of gas. Guess what. They didn't explode.

The researchers, in an article published in February of this year, speculate that perhaps the layer of ash on the cigarette prevents ignition, or possibly gasoline fumes quite naturally move away from the hottest part of the cigarette. They don't really know. Of course, this is not something for you to try at home to see if you can find your own

answers. If there are any children listening, this is still incredibly dangerous, so do not try it.

All sorts of things happen in movies that don't happen in real life. For example, if you believed the movies, you would think that:

- It is always possible to find a parking space right in front of the building you want to visit.
- There is never a traffic jam in Manhattan and police can always reach crime scenes quickly and easily.
- When in Paris, it doesn't matter where you are because you can see the Eiffel Tower from any window in the city.
- Not very good looking girls always become beautiful just by taking off their glasses and letting their hair down.
- It is possible for any of us to land a 747 as long as someone is in the control tower to talk us through it.
- CSI technicians are always able to get DNA matches in about an hour.

When Toni and I watch a movie together and see something incredible happen, one of us will usually say to the other, "How can they do that?" The answer is always, "Honey, it's the movies."

All of this brings us around to the gospel reading because sometimes, things happen in the Bible that seem to be fantastic. Some times, things happen in the Bible that strain our imagination. I think that the two parables in the lesson for today force us to think outside the box when it comes to the true focus of Jesus.

One of the charges that was leveled against Jesus was that he welcomed sinners and ate with them. Jesus told his accusers that people who are not sick have no need of a doctor. He came to the sick ones, the outcast ones, the misunderstood and misunderstanding ones, the ones on the outside, the ones who couldn't get a fair shake, the ones who just didn't get it, and the ones who had trouble with this whole God thing. He came to heal those who were ill and preach to those who were sick.

In the story for today, Jesus demonstrated that he was in fact guilty of the charge against him; about conspiring to minister to sinners. There were two groups of people there that day: in one corner were various tax collectors and sinners. In the other corner were the scribes and the Pharisees. Not surprisingly perhaps, the sinners and tax collectors were the ones who were actively listening to Jesus, while the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling and complaining about having to be so close to those who were so scruffy.

Jesus tells two parables which are at the heart of his ministry. Here's where the story began to strain the imagination of the rich and powerful. Just imagine, he asked them, that one of you has a hundred sheep. If one got lost, wouldn't you leave the other 99 and go out to search for the lost one? And when you found it, wouldn't you throw a party?

Or, he asked, what about a woman who has ten coins and loses one? Won't she go out of her way to shine a light in every corner and clean her house within an inch of its life in order to find the missing coin? When she finds it, she calls all of her friends and throws a party.

One of the things that I have never been able to understand is how people can be in church and be grumpy. Too often we see long faces and sour expressions. Too often, it seems to me, some of us go out of our way to look for things about which to complain. I'm just not sure how you can be a Christian and grumpy at the same time. I'm not sure how you can be a Christian and not have a smile on your face.

Of course, there are going to be times of sadness, and sorrow. Of course there are times of loneliness and misunderstanding. Of course there are times when we struggle. Of course there are times when we don't understand what is happening to us or why. But that is different than being grumpy just for the sake of being grumpy.

The Pharisees and scribes were grumpy. They were going out of their way to find things about which to complain. But Jesus said, "We're not going to complain. We are going to rejoice. We are going to have a party. We are going to praise God. There is joy in heaven when a lost sheep is found. There is rejoicing among the angels when a lost coin is found. There is utter and complete elation in heaven when a sinner repents and is brought back into the family of God."

In fact, he said, there is more joy in heaven over just one solitary sinner who finds his or her way back into the fold than there is all of the good, righteous, faithful folks who have no need to repent. Give Jesus a choice, and he would rather hang out with a repentant sinner than a self-righteous church-goer any day. This is just strange enough to make it into the movies.

So what Jesus is saying is that there is more joy in heaven over one alcoholic who repents and cleans up than over 99 tea-totalers who have never let a drop of booze touch their lips. There is more joy in heaven over one drug dealer who repents than over 99 who have never used. There is more joy in heaven over one career criminal who honestly repents than there is over 99 upright citizens who have never even had a traffic ticket. There is more joy in heaven over a prostitute who turns her life around than there is over a preacher like me who has led a fairly boring, uninteresting, unremarkable, and fairly clean life.

In seminary, I was introduced to a Roman Catholic Biblical scholar named John Dominic Crossan. His area of expertise is in historical Jesus studies. His work has, in the past decade or so, attracted a lot of criticism by conservative scholars because he has a fairly unorthodox view of the divinity of Christ. But he says something very interesting about the way that Jesus uses parables. He says that the parables ask how God would run the world if God sat on the throne of Caesar.

We all know who sits on Caesar's throne in the United States. I'm not only talking about the president, but the Congress as well. I suppose I would lump in all state and local officials as well. Some of these folks do a terrific job and some of them don't quite measure up, but we have elected them and have given them power to govern as best as they see fit. Now imagine if God sat on the thrones of power. What would happen? How would God run the world?

I believe that God would run the world in such a way that brought joy and pleasure throughout. What, you might ask, would bring God joy and pleasure?

- The lost that are found
- The broken that are healed
- The alienated that are reconciled
- The sick that are made well
- The oppressed that are freed
- The prisoner that is released
- The humble that are lifted up
- The dead that are brought back to life

Can you imagine such a world in which God sits on the throne; a world that is filled with joy and God's pleasure?

The religious leaders of Jesus' day couldn't imagine that. Had they lived in our day and age, they most likely would say that those things were the things of science fiction and the movies. They just couldn't understand the things that made God happy, that brought God joy, and that provided God with pleasure. I have a feeling that whenever a lost one is found, there is high fives all around heaven. I can imagine the angels chest bumping and pumping their fists in the air.

Imagine a room full of guys watching the Indianapolis Colts and the Denver Broncos game which is coming up on September 30. Now imagine how I am going to react when Jay Cutler throws a sixty yard touchdown pass to wide receiver Brian Clark. OK, don't do that. Imagine how the other guys are going to react when Peyton Manning throws a sixty yard touchdown pass to Marvin Harrison. They are going to be jumping up and yelling and high fiving everyone else in the room.

That is how God acts when one sinner repents and finds his or her way back into heaven. That is something that the Pharisees and the scribes just couldn't understand. They had trouble finding joy.

In the gospel parables for this morning, people are invited to a lost but found sheep party. They are invited to a lost but found coin party. That sort of stuff happens only in the gospel. As Jesus says, "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

You may have 99 sheep and a pocket full of pennies, but are you willing to temporarily forget about them in order to go looking for one who is lost? And when the lost one is found, are you willing and ready to join in the party?

You see, I think that the church too often acts like the Pharisees and the scribes. Too often we are more concerned about what we have rather than what we have lost.

We know that God's kingdom is indeed coming. The men and women who sit on Caesar's throne will not be found there forever. Are we willing to act like God is already sitting on the throne of power and is already running the world? Are we able to find pleasure in the things in which God finds pleasure? Are we able to share in God's joy when one sinner repents? Are we willing to join the search party for the lost ones so that we can all join in the celebration together?