

Alanna Sullivan: I cannot believe I forgot to mention the 2019 20 UChoir. We are so, so blessed by you and your music, and you could tell I got caught up in it. So thank you. Just such a blessing.

Alanna Sullivan: Will you pray with me. Oh God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Alanna Sullivan: I have to admit that I was a little hesitant to preach on the parable of the lost sheep today, for it is a subject of family lore. When my grandfather was a minister and recently out of seminary, he was invited to preach on this very parable before a congregation of distinguished preachers. And if that was not intimidating enough, two of those ministers in the congregation were his new brother-in-laws, who had also been invited as promising young clergy. So my grandfather worked diligently on the sermon. The night before, he sat at his typewriter, working into the wee hours. This could not just be another sermon. And he tried to distill all of Christian thought into this one sermon. No idea would go left unsaid.

Alanna Sullivan: But as the story goes, my grandmother, who was unconditionally supportive and loving of him, could not find a single positive thing to say about the sermon. It was a complete flop. So to this day, when someone in our family wants to do something really well and tries just a little too hard, we say, "Well, that was a lost sheep sermon." So now you will know what I mean when I say today that I hope to preach on the Parable of the Lost Sheep without preaching a lost sheep sermon.

Alanna Sullivan: So let us set the stage for our gospel lesson today. A crowd is pressing in around Jesus to hear his teachings. Everyone is there for a different reason. The disciples are there to receive his instructions, the Pharisees and the scribes stand on the fringe, keeping tabs of his radical teachings. If cell phones were around there, you can imagine them filming Jesus and posting a video on social media, with the hashtag can you believe this guy, dangerous dude, weirdo, or perhaps something worse. And Jesus is breaking bread with sinners and tax collectors, those whom society has displaced to the fringe. They are the outcasts and deemed unworthy. Others fear being associated with them because it might ruin their reputations. So when Jesus shares the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, you cannot help but wonder to whom is he speaking, who is his message for. The passage states that Jesus told them the parables. The antecedent is not clear, and there are at least two possible audiences mentioned.

Alanna Sullivan: On the one hand, there are the Pharisees, sneering at Jesus for the bad company that he keeps. And on the other hand, there are the sinners and tax collectors, members of that bad company. We should also note that Pharisees and tax collectors frequently appear in the gospels. Sometimes they are even

the characters in the parables themselves. But the listeners of that time would have had a very different understanding of them than we do today.

Alanna Sullivan: Pharisees were members of an ancient Jewish sect, distinguished by its strict observance of the tradition and written law. The Pharisaic way of life was practiced by only a select few, prior to the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem. The Pharisees educated their Jewish kin on how to take their Jewish tradition and the Torah seriously. Roman violence devastated institutions of Jewish life with the destruction of the second temple. And so the Pharisaic tradition of teaching and living was a force behind the survival of the Jewish people. So the listeners of Jesus's day would have held them in high regard, and tax collectors would not have been reminiscent of today's IRS agents. They were franchisees of a corrupt political system that devoured the poor and stuffed the wealthy.

Alanna Sullivan: Tax collectors were considered to be collaborators with the Roman Empire. Each tax collector was assigned a district and responsible for collecting a pre-fixed tax from residents of that area. They then paid the empire that set amount, and they then had the freedom to extract money from their neighbors in whatever ways they preferred. And they kept whatever money they had collected beyond what they owed to the empire. Often they farmed out responsibilities to others, thereby constructing a pyramid scheme of greed. The gospel tells us that one of the main reasons the Pharisees disdained Jesus was because he welcomes sinners and these tax collectors.

Alanna Sullivan: And the Greek word for welcome here is perhaps more aptly translated as to bring into one's arms. This is not a passive welcome spoken at the front door when a guest arrives at your home. It's an active embrace. It's a drawing in of your guest. It echoes the enveloping embrace that the father gives to his prodigal son, later on in Luke. Tax collectors and sinners would have found this message reassuring, for it is good news. They are the ones that God welcomes and finds them, because no one else wants their company. Pharisees never missed an opportunity to tell them that they were lost causes. They are not God's kind of people. And it would not occur to the Pharisees to even try to get to know them, let alone that they are the ones that are sought out by God.

Alanna Sullivan: It reminds me of the movie Babe, which tells the story of a pig raised as livestock, who wants to do the work of a sheep dog. I have very fond memories of watching this movie with the same grandmother who couldn't find a nice thing to say about my grandfather's lost cause of a sermon. The animals on Hoggett Farm all have preconceived notions of one another. The sheep are convinced that the dogs are reckless. Dogs are convinced that the sheep are dim-witted, and nothing would convince them otherwise. Each group saying, "The way things are is the way things are."

Alanna Sullivan: If you are dismissed as a lost cause, this parable is good news indeed. God seeks and embraces you. And what's more, Jesus posits that there is more joy being

lost than there is for those who never get lost in the first place. There is a joy in being lost, because God not only seeks you out, but celebrates when you are found. How different these parables must have sounded to the other audience, the perceived found, the Pharisees. For the message is not opaque. There's no reading between the lines. How disconcerting it must have been to hear that they had it wrong all the way along. God leaves behind the dutiful to seek out the wayward. And furthermore, when the lost are found, God envelops them with open arms. There is joy in realizing one's total dependence upon God's love and mercy. It displaces the Pharisees from their position of privilege and power. They are no longer the arbiters of what is right and what is good.

Alanna Sullivan: Preacher and professor Karoline Lewis said, "It is a sad reality of the human condition that all too often, in the face of our own fears, our default reaction is entrenchment, self-justification. Our insecurity in our future all too often turns into certainty about the fate of the other. Our sense of justification gets caught up in our own self-righteousness, rather than trust in God's love." So friends, how do we receive this news? How do we receive the celebratory news of God's unconditional love and unending grace? How we respond reveals whether we believe relationships and self-worth are based upon merit or mercy. Does the gospel only sound good to us when we see ourselves as the targets of God's grace and joy, or does it still sound good when we see others as the recipients of God's grace too, even if those others are people who very much don't look or act like us. And then there's the humbling reality that we all fall short of God's grace.

Alanna Sullivan: As Mr. Rogers captured in his signature succinct and profound way, "The very same people who are good sometimes are the very same people who are bad sometimes." For each of us have a little bit of Pharisee and a little bit of tax collector within us. Sometimes we're virtuous, sometimes we're self-righteous. Sometimes we are crooked, and sometimes we're honest. Sometimes we are right, sometimes we are wrong. We always fall short, and that is just part of being human. Now I'm not saying that we don't stand up and speak out in the face of bigotry, racism, sexism, xenophobia, Islamophobia. As Christians, we are called to speak truth in the name of love.

Alanna Sullivan: These parables, however, teach us that the invitation to enter into the Kingdom of God shows up when we least expect it. A mother of eight children was asked if she had favorites. "Favorites?" she replied, "Yes, I have favorites. I love the one who is sickest until he is well. I love the one who is in trouble until she is safe again. And I love the one who is farthest away until they come home."

Alanna Sullivan: There are no people who are lost causes. We are all lost, all wandering people, waiting to be found and freed by God's grace. And that is good news indeed.