

**“The Lost Sheep” – Matthew 18:12–14**

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The parable in Matthew 18 that we read today is one of the clearest of all the parables spoken by the Lord Jesus. A man had one hundred sheep, and when one of them went astray, he left the ninety-nine and went out to seek the one that was lost. This was not merely a parable but could also have been an event that often happened in reality. Indeed, in the days of Jesus in Palestine, such things occurred frequently. As mentioned in today's church bulletin, Palestine is a narrow strip of land between the Mediterranean Sea in the west and the Jordan River in the east, shaped like a long rectangle or trapezoid. The Jordan River flows in a lowland below sea level and is the lowest river in the world. The central part of this land is hilly terrain where the Jews grazed their sheep. Pasture grew sparsely there, and unlike Japan, there were no fences or enclosures. The width of this hilly area was only about three to five kilometers. Therefore, sheep often wandered far in search of grass, out of the shepherd's sight, and frequently strayed from the flock. Particularly toward the east, where the land descends steeply toward the Jordan, sheep often fell into ravines. Once that happened, there was little hope of rescue. For that reason, shepherds, regarding their sheep as valuable property, kept a close watch and, if a sheep strayed, went out to search for it as part of their routine duty.

Let us pause here to consider what kind of animal a sheep is. Sheep are considered the most docile among livestock. They are not energetic animals but prefer to move in groups. Left alone, a sheep becomes stressed. Therefore, when a leader appears, sheep naturally follow together as a flock. In Mongolia, for example, it is said that shepherds sometimes place a goat as the leader of the sheep. Goats, unlike sheep, prefer to act alone. Sheep have very wide vision—up to 300 degrees—but poor eyesight, unable to see clearly beyond ten meters. They rely instead on their sense of smell, recognizing the odor of other sheep to stay together. Their hearing is especially sharp, allowing them to distinguish the voice of their shepherd from strangers. John 10 affirms this: “The sheep know his voice, and they follow him.” This is true. As for the difference between sheep and goats: sheep have more fat in their bodies and more wool than goats, enabling them to withstand cold. For example, in Hokkaido, where winters are severe, sheep thrive, but goats cannot endure such cold. Palestine too has cold nights, which sheep survive well. The Jews also ate sheep rather than goats to obtain fat. Sheep cannot swim, nor can they walk backward. In other words, they are not quick or clever animals. Therefore, when a sheep strayed from the flock, as in today's passage, it was a dangerous act that could easily cost its life. The shepherd had no choice but to bring it back.

In today's parable, when such an accident occurs, the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine on the hills and goes in search of the one. At first, we may worry: won't the ninety-nine left behind also be endangered without their leader? But be assured. In Jesus' time, sheep were not privately owned but belonged to entire villages. Usually, two or three shepherds together cared for them. Thus, the ninety-nine could be entrusted to others while one shepherd went searching. Jesus said that this shepherd, who goes out after the one lost sheep, represents none other than God, whom we call our Heavenly Father.

Incidentally, this parable of the lost sheep is not only in Matthew but also in Luke 15, where it is paired with the parable of the lost coin and the prodigal son. Yet Luke presents it differently. Luke concludes with the words: “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” In Luke, the lost sheep represents the sinner, the unsaved. In Matthew, however, the lost sheep is “one of these little ones,” a member of the community who has strayed. In such cases, the leader—the pastor—must go after that member and bring them back. To put it theologically, Luke’s version is about salvation; Matthew’s is about the church.

Nevertheless, both versions share common messages.

**First,** God’s love is personal. I once heard a mother who gave birth to her third child say, “At first I was anxious, including financially. But once I held my baby, my fears vanished. Each of my three children is precious. Not one is unnecessary. I thank God for giving me this third child.” God’s love is like this. He calls each of us by name and treats us as unique, irreplaceable persons.

I also heard from a missionary who once preached in prisons in an Asian country. Prisoners there were identified only by numbers. When he was invited to speak, he began: “Today I have come to introduce you to Someone who calls you not by a number but by your name.” Indeed, God calls us by name.

**Second,** God’s love is seeking love. The shepherd did not sit waiting for the sheep to return on its own. He went out himself, searching until he found it. In my ministry, I too have traveled far to visit. For example, when serving in my previous church, one member moved to Karuizawa after retirement. Later her husband fell ill and was hospitalized in Saku. I drove with my wife to visit him. It was then I first saw the Chikuma River. I had not gone sightseeing, yet standing there, I remembered it was the setting of Shimazaki Tōson’s works and felt moved. Likewise, God goes out, seeking those who are lost.

**Third,** God’s love is patient love. Sheep are said to be weak and foolish. When they fall into danger, it is not the shepherd’s fault—it is their own. Yet we cannot laugh at them as if it were someone else’s problem. I remember learning of a law professor at my university who was a Christian. His father, also a famous professor, was tragically killed by his own grandson. I saw him bowing deeply before cameras. In that moment, I realized that regardless of position or honor, every human heart hides darkness. The lost sheep is really us. We too are weak and foolish. Yet God does not abandon us. Like a shepherd who risks his life to descend into a ravine, God Himself comes down to us.

**Finally,** God’s love is strengthening love. Some love corrupts and weakens people. God’s love saves and restores. It gives wisdom to the wandering, guidance to the lost, and strength to the weak. It redeems sinners and transforms them into holy people. We are grateful that Jesus Christ, the Lord of our church, is such a Good Shepherd. Let us strive never to be separated from Him.

Prayer