

A HOUSE OF HOSPITALITY AND LOVE

Can you IMAGINE what it must have FELT like to be that 100th SHEEP in our Scripture Lesson today? I mean, think about it: HERE'S the SHEPHERD, putting his SHEEP into the sheepfold: 95, 96, 97, 98, 99... *HEY, where's old 100?* Now, I'D probably say: *Well, THAT'S close enough! Close the gate, and let's go home for supper! 99 out of 100 ain't bad!* But, THANK GOD that GOD is NOT concerned with PERCENTAGES! NO, our GREAT Shepherd, LEAVES the 99 and goes OFF in SEARCH of the ONE! And that ONE, my friends, is YOU -- and ME! You SEE: God loves EACH and every ONE of us as IF we are the ONLY one in this world for God TO love! You see: God doesn't LOVE us as a HERD! God LOVES us as INDIVIDUALS! God LOVES us like that ONE lost SHEEP in our Scripture Lesson! THAT'S the message of Jesus in this PARABLE!

When I was a KID, there was a FAMILY in town with about a DOZEN children. And unfortunately, ONE of those children was KILLED one summer night in an AUTO accident. And I remember how my friends and I thought it was so STRANGE that the MOTHER in this family became SO grief-stricken, SO heartbroken. And I remember asking: *WHY is this woman SO upset? She HAS 11 MORE, for crying out loud!* But, what I was TOO young to REALIZE is that she didn't LOVE them as a HERD, or a FLOCK. She loved EACH and every ONE of them as IF that ONE child were her ONLY child. Well friends: THAT is the way God loves YOU and ME, as IF we were the ONLY ones in the world for God TO love.

After all, IF we look at Jesus, in the gospels, we QUICKLY realize that that's EXACTLY how JESUS loves EACH and every person He meets. And as I always SAY, *if you want to know what GOD looks like, just look at JESUS. JESUS is the INCARNATION of God, the EN-FLESHMENT of God. Jesus is GOD in the FLESH.* And more than anything else, Christianity is the SIMPLE truth that GOD, who is EVERYWHERE, became SOMEWHERE in this person called JESUS. And God **DID** this INCREDIBLE thing so that WE human beings can look at ANOTHER human being, JESUS, and see GOD in the flesh. IN the person of JESUS, you and I can actually SEE God's love ALIVE and at WORK in this world. And God doesn't just love the POWERFUL people, or the RICH PEOPLE, or the *PIOUS* people. GOD loves ALL people, EVEN the SINNER, EVEN the OUTCAST, EVEN the ADULTRESS, EVEN the TAX collector, EVEN the LEPER, EVEN the PROSTITUTE, and even ME! Yes, IN Jesus, we see ALL people being loved by God as IF they were the ONLY ones on earth for God TO love. And it's BEAUTIFUL, isn't it? And, it feels so GOOD to be the RECIPIENTS of THAT kind of love! And BECAUSE God loves EACH of us THAT much, WE need to be reaching out and SHARING that love with OTHERS. THAT'S what the church of Jesus Christ OUGHT to be ABOUT: being the BODY of Christ -- being HIS hands and HIS voice in OUR world today, being expressions of HIS unconditional love -- HIS Body, ALIVE with His Spirit of LOVE!

In fact, isn't that what JESUS, through PETER, is saying to US in our Scripture Lesson from John's gospel? He says: *IF you love ME, then FEED my sheep and TEND my lambs.* In other words, WE are to LOVE the Risen **CHRIST** by loving each other, and ALL people. WE are to LOVE the Risen Christ by BEING like that SHEPHERD, who is NOT content with 99 out of 100, but who goes in SEARCH of the ONE lost sheep, as if that ONE were the ONLY one in this world TO love. And how MANY times in the gospels does Jesus talk about our calling to

LOVE our fellow human beings? How many TIMES does He SAY things to His disciples like: *Love one another as I have loved you*, or, *Whatever you DO to even the LEAST of your brothers and sisters, you do it to ME*, or, *Do unto others as you would have them do to you*? HOW many times? Yes, it's UNDENIABLE! Our CALLING, as the church of Jesus Christ, is to be a HOUSE of HOSPITALITY and LOVE, a house where EVERYONE is welcomed with an EXTRAVAGANT welcome and LOVED for WHO they are, ALL in the name of Jesus Christ.

SO, whether it's our Stephen Ministry program, which we will revive next Sunday, or our YOUTH ministry; whether it's our choirs or our various small groups; whether it's our Church School or our various MISSION projects; whether it's our ADULT spiritual formation classes or the work of our PASTORS; whether it's our Women's Fellowship or our NURSERY school, the LOVE in this church OUGHT to be CONSTANTLY bubbling up and OVERFLOWING and POURING out, so that ALL over Keene -- and BEYOND -- people are saying things like: *Wow! What an AMAZING church that IS! Wow! I've never seen ANYTHING like it! WOW! THAT church welcomes ANYBODY and EVERYBODY! Wow! THAT'S the kind of church I want to belong to! I didn't know there WAS such a thing!* Yes, like a SPRING of fresh water that keeps BUBBLING up, our church ought to be CONSTANTLY touching people's lives and TRANSFORMING them, through the gift of LOVE. And in the process, it will be OBVIOUS to EVERYONE that God's Spirit is ALIVE here, and MIRACLES are happening! Yes, THAT'S our calling! THIS house OUGHT to be the Body of Christ: a house of HOSPITALITY and love!

And SO, I would challenge EACH of us to do **OUR** part in MAKING this church a *HOUSE of HOSPITALITY and LOVE*. I would challenge EACH of us to reach OUT, BEYOND the confines of our OWN comfortable, little world, to get to know and CARE about ALL the people here -- as MANY as we CAN -- **AND** to let OTHERS get to know and love US as well. TRY to begin seeing EACH and every person you meet here as that ONE lost sheep, as the ONLY one at this moment who needs YOUR care and love!

And for ALL of us here -- newcomers and old-timers alike -- I would challenge ALL of us to REALIZE that there is a COST to THIS kind of love. And the COST is our TIME, our TALENT and our TREASURE. **IF** this WONDERFUL kind of LOVE is going to THRIVE, and change lives, and make MIRACLES happen, then EACH and every ONE of us **HAS** to **SHARE** the **COST** of it! EACH and every ONE of us **HAS** to give GENEROUSLY of our TIME, our TALENT and our TREASURE because, otherwise, it CANNOT happen.

Now, sometime within the next week, ALL of us should receive a MAILING from the church that will include BOTH a *FINANCIAL* pledge card, AND a *TIME and TALENT* pledge form. And I would BEG you to READ the letter that comes WITH them VERY carefully -- and maybe even more than ONCE, and then to PRAY about it and STRUGGLE with it, and then to CHOOSE to make an **INVESTMENT** in the LOVE of God that we experience (and will INCREASINGLY experience) IN and through this church family, IN and through this HOUSE of hospitality and love. And THAT'S what our pledges of time, talent and treasure REALLY are, you know: INVESTMENTS -- NOT Wall Street investments, but LASTING investments -- and indeed, the most IMPORTANT investments we'll ever MAKE. Because **WHAT** is life all **ABOUT** anyway? It's all about **LOVE**. Friends, let's do everything in OUR power to make OUR church a HOUSE of hospitality and LOVE, a HOUSE where ALL who come here are treated like that ONE lost sheep. Yes, please PRAY about and make YOUR investment in this HOUSE of hospitality and love! TOGETHER, we can BE the LOVE of Christ IN the flesh here in Keene, if we all will INVEST our TIME, our TALENTS, and our TREASURE. Amen.