

“God Our Good Gardener and Shepherd”

Luke 113:6-9 & 15:1-7

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Prayer for Understanding Creator God, Your Word is like soil, something we can root ourselves in. Your Word is like the sun, big enough to touch everything with its warmth.

And your Word is like a gardener, a love that prunes and encourages, waters and delights, seeds and tends. So as we turn to your text today, warm our bones, tend to our broken pieces and show us how to grow. Amen.

God’s love for you, and everyone is relentless, perfect, gracious, unconditional, all-inclusive, steadfast, complete and everlasting. Absolutely nothing can separate any one from God’s love. No matter what someone does or does not do, God loves them. No matter what someone believes or does not believe, God loves them. All people are our beloved siblings. We will spend entirety enjoying the goodness and love of all people.

Today we will explore two parables that reveal God’s unconditional love; the parable of the Good Gardener and the Good Shepherd.

A reading from the gospel of Luke: **Luke 13:6-9 NLT “Then Jesus told this story: “A man planted a fig tree in his garden and came again and again to see if there was any fruit on it, but he was always disappointed. Finally, he said to his gardener, ‘I’ve waited three years, and there hasn’t been a single fig! Cut it down. It’s just taking up space in the garden.’ “The gardener answered, ‘Sir, give it one more chance. Leave it another year, and I’ll give it special attention and plenty of fertilizer. If we get figs next year, fine. If not, then you can cut it down.”**

Voices of productivity and disappointment scream at us through our schools, work, culture, and some families demanding, you have value, worth, deserve to live, only if you get good grades, are productive and work hard producing what society wants. And since the bar is always being raised, anything short of slavery to continuous increasing productivity is a disappointment. Disappointment shames, blames, controls, oppresses, and uses people.

God declares you have value, worth, and have eternal life because you are my beloved child. Even if you produce nothing, you are still loved, cherished, celebrated and wonderful. When someone screams at us, “be productive,” “I am disappointed in you.” God is the Good Gardener always proclaiming give them more chances. God lovingly listens, cares, nurtures, nourishes, and guides. God’s love is never dependent on our productivity. God loves us for who we are, not what we produce. God loves our true self, not our fake self that is trying to conform to the expectations of others. God our Good Gardener never cuts down a tree, never stops loving a person, because a wonderful fruit for God is a person being themselves.

The drivenness for ever more productivity is diminishing our lives, hurting our relationships, and condemns good aspects that God commands such as rest, sauntering, and sabbath. For many it is difficult to quiet the destructive voice of a disappointed person. Many of our ailments, problems, and divisions come from being viewed as a disappointment. Sometimes the disappointed voice comes from our self. Loving our self involves banishing the voices of disappointment. Parents sometimes transfer their disappointment of themselves onto a child demanding their child produce, so they can live through their child’s grades, sports, accomplishments, and awards. Many families have been destroyed by drivenness for productivity mixed with disappointment.

Henri Nouwen writes: “As long as I keep running about asking: “Do you love me? Do you really love me?” I give all power to the voices of the world and put myself in bondage because the world is filled with “ifs.” The world says: “Yes, I love you if you are good-looking, intelligent, and wealthy. I love you if you have a good education, a good job, and good connections. I love you if you produce much, sell much, and buy much.” There are endless “ifs” hidden in the world’s love. These “ifs” enslave me, since it is impossible to respond adequately to all of them. The world’s love is and always will be conditional. As long as I keep looking for my true self in the world of conditional love, I will remain “hooked” to the world — trying, failing, and trying again. It is a world that fosters addictions because what it offers cannot satisfy the deepest craving of my

heart.” God’s love for you, and everyone is relentless, perfect, gracious, unconditional, all-inclusive, steadfast, complete, and everlasting.

Pastor Jeff Chu writes: “This parable is a rebuke against those of us who are all too comfortable with our on-demand, instant-gratification culture—and who believe the lie that we can control more than we actually do.”

Cole Arthur Riley prays: “Rested God, we want more than a life lived exhausted. That you have woven rhythms of rest into our minds and bodies reminds us we are worthy of habitual restoration. Remind us that when we pause or rest, we are restoring not only our bodies but the very condition of a world held captive by greed and utility. We grow weary of societies who view us as more machine than human, more product than soul. The fear that we will not survive without overworking stalks our days. Liberate us from depraved socioeconomic structures that require that the poor and vulnerable sacrifice their own rest at the altar of survival and opportunity. Remind us that the beauty and paradox of our humanness is that we were made to close our eyes, that we might see. Amen”

“Slow Growth”

a poem by Sarah Speed

There’s a vine in the South that covers everything.

It chokes out the light. Grows up to twelve inches per day.

In a matter of years, it will blanket a forest.

If you saw it from space, you’d marvel at its reach.

If you saw it from the passenger seat, you’d weep at what it covers.

Those looking for fast shade plant this invasive vine.

Who can blame them? We’re all impatient.

But if it’s fruit you want—the tart cherry, the sticky sweet kumquat, the soft side of a peach, the crisp bite of an apple—then bless the rain.

Thank the sun. Put your hands in the dirt and wait.

The gospel of Luke proclaims: **Luke 15:1-7 NLT “Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the teachers of religious law complain that Jesus was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them! So Jesus told them this story: “If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will they do? Won’t they leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until they find them? And when they find them, they will joyfully carry them home on their shoulders. When they arrive, they will call together their friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!”**

God is our good shepherd. Herding sheep is a never-ending task. As soon as one is found, another goes missing. Our lives have a similar ebb and flow, in one moment we might feel like we have it all together, and in the next, we are struggling. The good news is that no matter how “lost” we feel, the Good Shepherd is by our side. Whether life is going well, or falling apart, God is drawing us home where the entire cosmos will celebrate our goodness made whole for eternity. The good news is God’s love is relentless. God will turn the world upside down for each person, to connect with them, welcome them home and celebrate them. So, no matter where you are on the spectrum of lost and found, God loves you, God will make you glorious and God will unite you into God’s glorious family forever.

Teachers celebrate when a student finds their voice. The world is enhanced when musicians find their sound and artists find their creativity. Parents celebrate when their child finds their passion. In the parable of the found sheep, the search continues until the final finding. God never tires of noticing the missing. God loves and loves and loves so all will find their voice, sound, creativity and passion. God loves so all will be welcomed home, celebrated and enjoy harmonious community. Have you found your voice? Have you found your freedom? Have you found your joy? Maybe none of us are found until all of us are found. Whose voices have you not yet noticed? Which ones are missing, unread, unheard, unappreciated? What search parties have you joined? We are called to join God in loving all, in helping everyone find their voice, sound, creativity, passion, freedom and joy. We are called to join God in loving all people helping each person find their unique belonging to God’s family. If we are going to honor our prayer, “God’s kingdom come”

and experience heaven on earth we will join God in relentless love for everyone by welcoming everyone to one worldwide gracious hospitable home.

The religious leaders were grumbling about Jesus' eagerness to welcome and dine with corrupt political tax collectors and notorious sinners, so Jesus tells a parable where all are found, where these despised people are welcomed home to heaven and celebrated. Why do we spend so much time and energy labeling people and trying to determine what is sinful when these things make no difference to how we are commanded to treat others? We are commanded to love everyone.

At the time Jesus first told this parable shepherds were typically poor, outcasts. Imagine the shepherd's joy to hear God personified as a shepherd.

Some label this parable, "The Counting, Seeking, Finding, Celebrating Shepherd." How do we move beyond the label, "The Lost Sheep"? What causes is to focus on "lost" instead of the loving, relentless, seeking, finding, welcoming, celebrating Good Shepherd God? We are invited to shift our thoughts from thinking that anyone is lost, to all will be found. We are invited to shift our thoughts from thinking that any goodness in our life is lost, to every goodness will be found and resurrected. Love endures forever. Goodness, joy, delight endures forever. Every person will be resurrected and endure forever.

When have you felt lost? What did it feel like to be found? If you feel lost and have never known the feeling of being found that glory will happen for you. How can you join God in helping others feel found, loved and celebrated? How can you join God in stopping your thoughts that scream "loss" and join God in guiding you to the abundant life of being completely found, loved and celebrated? As one discovers these answers they become shepherds. Discipleship is being a sheep and a shepherd; a learner and a teacher; a wanderer and a guide; a receiver of love and a giver of love.

"The Good Shepherd"

a poem by Sarah Speed

Jesus said, "Who among you wouldn't leave the 99?

Who among you wouldn't look for the one?"

Someone in the crowd probably rolled their eyes.

Someone squirmed and looked at their palms.

Someone sighed and thought to themselves,

"This man doesn't understand the business.

What fool would leave 99 to look for one?"

But maybe God was not talking about us.

Maybe God was talking about her own reckless love.

Maybe God was talking about her own willingness to turn the world upside down for me.

God is the Good Gardener and the Good Shepherd. God's love for you, and everyone is relentless, perfect, gracious, unconditional, all-inclusive, steadfast, complete and everlasting. Amen