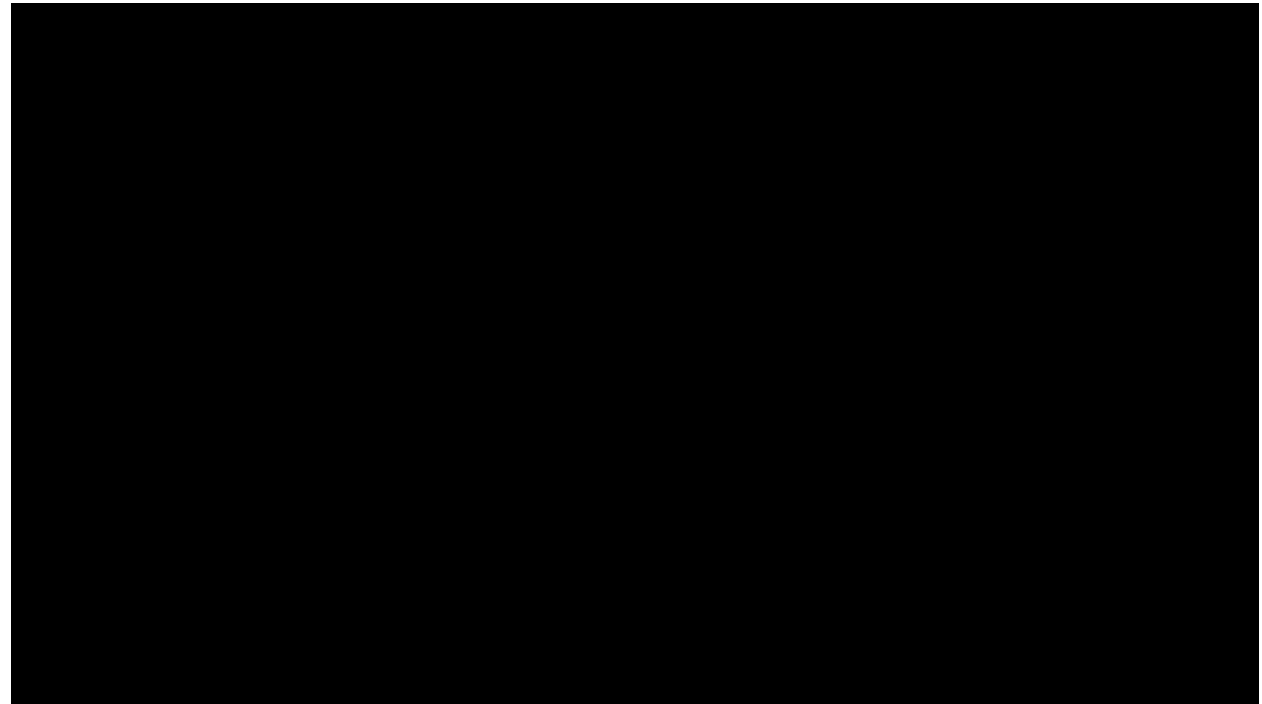


One

Luke 15:1-10

September 11, 2016



(Video: images from September 11-12, 2001, set to Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*; link = <http://sermons.believersjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/adagio.mp4>)

That brings back a host of feelings, doesn't it?

Fifteen years ago today, our world changed. Fifteen years ago today, we changed. For the better? Did we change for the better? We might have ...

The events of that day shocked us, overwhelmed us, pierced our hearts, flooded our spirits with grief, but brought us together. It was the grief itself, our shared loss, that brought us together, not just all of us with each other within the bounds of our own nation, but all of us with so many others from so many other nations too who shared our horror and our grief. It was not a common enemy that united us that day, but shared suffering. It was not anger that brought us together, but empathy.

And we were humbled. Suddenly, we too were vulnerable. We were not untouchable, impregnable, immune from threat. We lost, for a moment, some of our hubris, and it was replaced by coming together to console one another and replaced by wisdom, wisdom that understood that we too are just one part of this wide world, all of us subject to the same threats and the same challenges and the same opportunities.

That was a piece, I think, of what engendered so much empathy for us around the globe. That day we experienced for ourselves some of the suffering, the anguish, the vulnerability, that so many have experienced themselves for generations and some must now live with every day.

That day opened for us a window of opportunity: to leave behind hubris for humility, to leave behind unchecked ambition for shared purpose, to replace suspicion with empathy and mistrust with compassion. It was an act of evil that transformed us that day, but the first impulses it raised in us were good. We wanted not revenge, but comfort, not a war on terror or anything or anyone else, but peace. We wanted peace, for all. Our heroes that day were not victors, but healers, not warriors, but people who tended to our wounds, our wounds of body and spirit.

We might have become better and wiser people because of that day. Did we?

What is the tenor of our national mood today? Humility or hubris? Unity or fragmentation? Common purpose or polarization? Compassion or fear? Empathy or anger? You know! We are more divided, more anxious, more cynical, more defiant, more cynical, more desperate than at any time in my lifetime.

And our politics is broken. I am not saying our system is broken, not yet, but our system, our way of doing democracy, our way of being a nation, is threatened because our politics, our way of doing things together, is broken. Our system depends on checks and balances, but also on shared purpose, shared values, and, dare I say it, mutual respect. But in our politics, respect has been trashed, there are few if any shared values, and the only shared purpose is a unfettered desire to win at all costs.

So we need to talk. You and I need to talk, here, about politics! Now let's be clear, I am not about to endorse any candidate or party. Even if I could or even if I wanted to, there is no candidate in this presidential race I would be ready to endorse.

No, we don't need to talk about Republican politics or Democratic politics, but the politics of Jesus. We need to talk, here, about the politics of Jesus, because before we are Democrats, before we are Republicans, before we are Americans, we are Christians, followers of Jesus, children of God, and it is this identity, this allegiance, that puts all the rest of it into perspective.

Jesus ... politics? Yes, the politics of Jesus! Talk about politics here? Yes, here!

Listen to this definition of politics:

Politics is the study or practice of the distribution of power and resources within a given community.

Politics is concerned with the ways power and resources are distributed in a community. Jesus is concerned about the ways power and resources are distributed among the members of the community of God's people, so Jesus has something to say about politics.

Jesus had something to say to the Pharisees and teachers of the Law about politics. They objected to the time and attention Jesus was giving to people they considered unworthy of such an investment. By welcoming them and eating with them, Jesus was giving them much too much credit and therefore much too much power. By welcoming them and eating with them, Jesus was making them members of the community on equal footing with rest, entitled to the same respect, entitled to the same consideration. But if you give your respect away so easily, what of all those good people who have worked so hard to earn it?

So Jesus told them a story:

Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them -- what do you do?

The beauty of the story is that everybody knows what you do: you go look for the lost sheep! Any of the Pharisees, all of the teachers of the Law, would do the same, because when you're a shepherd, every sheep matters. Each one matters. One matters.

The holy God is a shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd ... and every sheep matters. Each one matters. One matters.

This is a key tenet of Jesus' politics: one matters. Each one matters. The Pharisee and the tax collector. The teacher and the outcast. But you don't divert all your resources to tending the ones who are already safe! It is the outliers, the vulnerable ones, the threatened ones, the lost ones, the disconnected ones, who command the attention of the shepherd.

It is with people as it is with sheep: when one is at risk, that is your priority. You go, you seek, and you keep on seeking, and when at last you find him, when you finally come to where she is, you sit with him and welcome him, you embrace her and you bring her home.

One matters. So what are the implications for our politics? This is what you don't do. You don't spend the majority of your resources improving the lives of the majority of the people, expecting the outliers to find a way to help themselves. When a sheep is lost, you don't blame the sheep. It doesn't matter who or what is at fault. The sheep is lost and that's what matters.

You don't congratulate yourself for taking such good care of the ninety-nine and happily sit with the flock waiting for the lost one to find its own way home! Or not. You go, you look, and you keep on looking until the lost one is found, because one matters!

One matters.

Our world has changed. We are more interdependent than ever and yet more divided than ever, more powerful than we ever have been and yet more vulnerable than we ever have been, sick of war and yet always at war. This brave new world is frightening and baffling and ever-changing. We face political and social and environmental challenges of such enormity that there may well be no answers even if we had the political will to seek them, which, at present, we do not.

So what do we do? We put our trust where it belongs. The Lord is my shepherd, not any politician, not any party.

*Don't put your trust in human leaders;
no human being can save you.*

And we seek God's kingdom, the community where vulnerable ones are protected, where lost ones are looked for, where one -- each one -- matters.