

Stupid **September 11, 2022**

When I was younger, my parents and teachers tried to instill good behavior. My parents and most teachers would not allow us to say the “s-word.” No, it’s not the s-word that you are thinking of. It’s the word “stupid.” That was a hurtful term, and so we were not allowed to call anyone the s-word.

My parents, I think, quickly realized that with 4 kids at home, “stupid” was not the worst thing that we could call each other, so they gave up eventually. But in school at least, for many years the s-word was forbidden.

As a result, there is a bit of a visceral reaction when I hear the word “stupid” in some contexts, including in church. When I hear that word in the reading from Jeremiah, calling the people of Israel “stupid children” for turning away from God, it’s uncomfortable. It’s grating. That sounds rude and harsh and unfair.

And we hear a similar tone in the psalm (though a different word): “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”

I think it’s meant to be harsh and uncomfortable, to try to wake up the people who have turned away from God. I don’t think that’s actually how God (as least the God I know) actually views people. It’s good for us to be aware of, to acknowledge the discomfort in hearing people being called “stupid” in the Bible.

Then the Gospel reading offers us an entirely different viewpoint, where Jesus gives two parables. The first is an image that we are familiar with. God is described as a shepherd who owns 100 sheep. One of those sheep gets lost in the wilderness. The shepherd we hear leaves the 99 in the wilderness and goes and seeks out that 1 lost sheep until he finds it.

Now pardon my French, but that is downright stupid. If a shepherd owns 100 sheep, he is fairly wealthy. One sheep isn’t going to make him or break him. From a purely economic standpoint, it’s just logical to go after the one sheep. What’s even stupider is that the shepherd leaves the 99 in the wilderness (not in a pen or fold), where they are vulnerable to attacks from predators, to go after the one.

It’s also a stupid idea because of the nature of sheep. There is a short video clip that made its rounds on the Internet several months ago. It shows a deep ditch, maybe 2 feet wide and a good 3 or 4 feet deep. A sheep has fallen headfirst into the ditch and is stuck. The camera shows a boy pulling the sheep out carefully by its back legs.

Finally, after a good 2 minutes of pulling and finagling, the sheep is freed. The boy lets the sheep go, and it prances away down the path. Then it makes a high leap of joy, savoring its freedom, and goes headfirst right back down into the ditch! Sheep are not the smartest of animals. But then what does that say about someone who risks everything to save one? Stupid.

Newsweek. Anders Anglesy. “Hilarious Stuck Sheep Video Goes Viral, Sparks Waves of Memes and Jokes.”
<https://www.newsweek.com/hilarious-stuck-sheep-video-goes-viral-sparks-waves-memes-jokes-1584676>. Accessed Sep 7, 2022.

Let's say the gamble pays off. The shepherd brings back the one sheep, and the other 99 are still safe. Who would invite his friends and neighbors over to a celebration of finding a lost animal? Those friends didn't even know that he lost a sheep. It's like being invited to a birthday party for a cat. You can picture the guests, standing awkwardly at the party with their small paper plate of cheese cubes and cold cuts, like when people throw birthday parties for their cats. Everyone is smiling weakly as the shepherd talks about what a great moment this was. The whole scenario is stupid. It doesn't compute. It is unrealistic.

But that, Jesus says, that love and devotion and excitement of the shepherd... that's the image of God rejoicing over one person who says to God, "Help." What an image.

Then, after this well-known parable of the shepherd, Jesus gives a pretty different image of God. Instead of a well-to-do shepherd, God is presented as a poor woman who has only 10 silver coins. The coins are drachmas, which are worth about a day's wages for a laborer. Not nothing, but not a chunk of gold.

The woman loses one of these coins, and so she searches all day and into the night (she lights a lamp), turning over couch cushions and sweeping under the oven, until she finds the lost coin. A little excessive, maybe, but we can relate. We might turn the house upside-down if we're looking for something we've lost.

But when the woman finds the drachma coin, that's when things get a little odd. Like the shepherd, she invites her friends and neighbors over to celebrate. What makes this even more absurd is that if she's inviting guests over to her home, there are expectations of the hospitality she should offer. It's a good assumption that she would spend more in food and refreshments for her guests than that one silver coin is worth! To put it simply, it would be stupid for this woman to celebrate so much after finding one silver coin.

And yet again, this is the level of joy that the angels of God experience when someone turns to God. It is nonsensical, but it is a powerful joy.

Now imagine hearing about that as a tax collector. You have been despised and treated as a traitor for your whole adult life. And then you hear that you are loved, that God is thrilled to have you say, "I want to know you." What an image of love and acceptance.

It's the same sense of endless patience and grace that Paul talks about in 1 Timothy. Paul acknowledges that he was a terrible person – a blasphemer, a man of violence, and someone who had Christians arrested. And yet, Paul says himself, that God showed him limitless patience and forgiveness when he converted, to the point that God empowered Paul to become one of the most influential people of the faith.

It doesn't make logical sense, and that is how grace works. Grace is, we could say, stupid. But that is grace. That is how 2nd chances work, and 3rd chances, and 4th and 5th. If someone disappoints you once, twice, three, four times, you begin to lose faith in that person. You give up on a sheep that keeps jumping into the ditch every time you set it free.

But the good news is that we know a God who never gets disappointed or loses hope in us. No matter what we've done in our lives, we can always turn to God and find new life and another chance.

Jesus gives us these two stories of forgiveness and new chances. I'll give you one more little modern story.

There once was a salesperson who worked at a large business that sold construction equipment. One summer, the salesperson left for vacation, and he failed to find someone to cover for him for the week he was away. As a result, he came back and found hundreds of messages and emails waiting for him. He missed out on numerous sales, sales of hundreds of thousands of dollars. It was a costly mistake.

This salesperson was called into his boss' office the day he got back. As we walked into the office, he knew this was it. His time here was finished.

The boss invited the salesman to sit down. They discussed what happened. They talked about what he should have done. They made plans to make up some of the business. Then the boss thanked the salesman and told him he could leave.

The salesperson paused in disbelief. He said, "You're not firing me?" The manager said, "We as a company just spent a couple hundred thousand dollars for you to learn that lesson. We're not going to fire you. Use that knowledge well."

It can be hard to believe that we deserve a 2nd or 3rd chance. But we worship a God who loves us dearly, and who is always rooting for us, and who never leaves us lost or alone.

Amen.