The Parable of the Good Shepherd

Background

Focus: the shepherd and his sheep (Matthew 18:12-14, Luke 15:1-7)

The primary sheep and shepherd parable of Jesus, recognized as authentic by many scholars, is the shepherd who searches for the one sheep that is lost and leaves the ninety-nine to do so. In this presentation, the gate is left open as the shepherd searches for the sheep, but you will also find that many of life’s conflicts find meaning and resolution in the themes from Psalm 23 and John 10, also present in the lesson.

Material

The gold box for The Parable of the Good Shepherd is on the New Testament shelves.

It contains:
- green felt underlay
- 12 brown felt strips
- 3 dark blue felt shapes
- 1 light blue felt shape
- 5 paper sheep
- 1 paper Good Shepherd
  (1 paper ordinary shepherd – not used in this story)
  (1 paper wolf – not used in this story)

Movements

Go to the New Testament shelves and bring the gold box containing The Good Shepherd to the circle.

Words

Watch carefully where I go so you will always know where to find this lesson.

Place the box in the middle of the table.

Look! It is the color gold. Something inside must be precious like gold. Perhaps there is a parable inside. Parables are even more valuable than gold, so maybe there is one inside.
When you mention the box being closed, knock on the top of the box like a door. When you are talking about the parable being a present, hold the box out toward the children as if you are giving it to them. The box is also closed. There is a lid. Maybe there is a parable inside. Sometimes, even if we are ready, we can't enter a parable. Parables are like that. Sometimes they stay closed.

The box looks like a present. Parables were given to you long ago as presents. Even if you don't know what a parable is, the parable is yours already. You don't have to take them, or buy them, or get them in any way. They already belong to you.

Sit back. Reflect on the need to be ready to open a parable and to keep from breaking it. When you and the children are ready, begin. You need to be ready to find out if there is a parable inside. It is easy to break parables. What is hard to do is to go inside.

Carefully move the box to your side. Remove the lid and leave it tipped up against the box to keep the children from being distracted by what's inside. I have an idea. Let's look inside and see what's there!

Take out the green underlay. First leave it crumpled. Then smooth it out in the middle of the table. I wonder what this could be? It certainly is green. Green. There is nothing here but green.

I wonder if this could be one of those things that frogs sit on in a pond? (Children will fill in the name if they know it.)

The idea is to invite many serious and sometimes funny responses. This supports ownership in the parable, but it also frustrates the idea that children already know what it is.

Look up at the imaginary tree. I wonder if this could be the top of a tree?

Turn it over. Smooth it out again. You might do this more than once. I wonder if this could be a leaf from a giant tree? It would have to be really tall.

Yes, it is a piece of cloth, but I wonder what is on the other side?

See, there is always the other side.
Take from the box the piece of light blue felt and place it to your far left on the green underlay. Smooth it out.

I wonder what this could be?

Bend over and look into the “window” or “mirror.”

I wonder if this could be a place to look through to the other side?

Next, take from the box the three pieces of dark blue felt. Hold each piece in the palm of your hand and show it to the children before placing it on your far right on the part of the underlay nearest the children.

Look, there is no light in there at all. I wonder what they could be? I wonder if they are so deep that the light cannot get there? It’s like holding a shadow in your hand.

Sometimes people who sit over there think they see a face. Oh, there is no light in the eyes. There is no light in the smile.

Take out a single brown strip and lay it close to you along your bottom right of the underlay. You can walk your fingers along it to suggest a path. Try to stretch it like a rubber band.

I wonder what this could be? A path? A flat log? A stick? No, it is not a rubber band.

Place the second strip parallel to the first one, but farther from you on the overlay.

Here’s another one. Maybe the path is in between.

Place the third piece to the left to connect the first two pieces. It should suggest goal posts for football.

Here’s another one. Look. Football? The goal posts? I wonder if it is a bridge between two paths?

Place the fourth piece to close the square. At an angle, it will look like a baseball diamond.

Here’s another one. Baseball? Now there is an inside and an outside.

Move one of the four strips to suggest the movement of a gate, then lay it flat again to make the square.

Let’s make a gate so if there is someone inside he or she can go outside. Or someone outside can go inside.

Lay the remaining strips on top of the strips already laid down so that you build up the square to a depth of three strips each.

There are more. It is getting stronger. I wonder what this could be? Yes, it could be a house, a kind of flat house, but everything’s flat in the parable. It could be a place for animals or people. I wonder who lives there?
Take a single sheep out of the box and place it in the sheepfold. Take out the remaining four sheep, one by one. As you wonder how many there might be, take one away, then another, until there is only one. As you begin to wonder if there are more, place the sheep back in the sheepfold until all five are back.

Oh, it's a place for sheep. I wonder how many sheep there really are? This many? This many? This many? This many? Maybe only this many? Or maybe there are this many and more.

There was once someone who said such amazing things and did such wonderful things that people followed him. They couldn't help it. They wanted to know who he was, so they just had to ask him.

sit back and reflect for a moment, then begin the parable with added focus.

When you say, "I am the Good Shepherd," take the Good Shepherd out of the box and hold it in your palm, showing it to the children. Place the Good Shepherd to your right of the sheepfold, between the sheepfold and the edge of the green underlay.

Once when they asked him who he was, he said, "I am the Good Shepherd."
Touch each sheep gently, one by one.

I knew each one of the sheep by name.

Lay back part of the sheepfold to open the gate. Move the Good Shepherd to your left on the underlay. Move the sheep, one by one, slowly out of the sheepfold into the grass. They move in single file. Move the first one then the others so they can catch up one by one.

And they know the sound of my voice. So when I call my sheep from the sheepfold, they follow me. I walk in front of the sheep to show them the way.

Move your hand over the green underlay to the left of the sheepfold.

I show them the way to the good grass…

First move the Good Shepherd and then move the sheep slowly, one by one, to the light blue felt water.

… and I show them the way to the cool, still, fresh water.

Move the Good Shepherd through the middle of the dark blue pieces of felt. Slowly begin to move the sheep through.

When there are places of danger,…

Move the sheep through one at a time. Move them slowly. They do not want to go; they turn this way and that. Finally, each one is through but one. Place the last and lost sheep under one of the pieces of dark blue felt with only his head showing. There will be silence as the sheep go through.

… I show them the way to go through.

Bring the four sheep just to the gate into the sheepfold. The Good Shepherd is back in his starting position.
Move each sheep into the sheepfold.

“I count each one as the sheep go inside.”

Move your hand as if the lost sheep were going in. Clearly that sheep is not there. Look under and above your hand for it.

“If one of the sheep is missing, I would go anywhere to look for the lost sheep…”

Move the Good Shepherd in front of the sheepfold and then slowly to the grass, to the water, and into the middle of the dangerous place. The gate to the sheepfold is still open.

“… in the grass, by the water, calling my sheep by name, even in places of danger.”

Take the lost sheep from behind the dark blue felt piece and tuck it behind the shoulders of the Good Shepherd. If your Good Shepherd already has a sheep on his back, don’t worry. That seldom bothers the children. If it does, they will speak up and you can say, “There’s really only one.”

“And when the lost sheep is found, I would put it on my back, even if it is very heavy, even if I am very tired, and carry it back safely to the sheepfold.”

Move the Good Shepherd and the lost sheep through the dangerous place and to the gate of the sheepfold. Take the sheep off the shepherd’s shoulders and leave it at the gate. Place the Good Shepherd back in his starting position. Move the lost sheep into the sheepfold and close the gate.

“When all the sheep are safe inside, I am so happy that I can’t be happy just by myself, so I invite all of my friends and we have a great feast.”

Sit back for a moment and reflect on the parable. Then begin the wondering.
Point to the sheepfold.  

- I wonder if these sheep have names?
- I wonder if the sheep are happy inside this place?
- I wonder where this place could really be?
- I wonder if you have ever come close to such a place?
- I wonder if you have ever found good grass?
- I wonder if you have ever had the cool, fresh, clear water touch you?
- I wonder if you have ever had to go through a place of danger?
- I wonder how you got through?
- I wonder if you have ever been lost?
- I wonder if you have ever been found?
- I wonder if the Good Shepherd has ever called your name?
- I wonder where this whole place could really be?

Move your hand over the good grass to your left.  

- I wonder if these sheep have names?

When the wondering is over, begin to place each of the objects back into the parable box with great care. Do not hurry. Name each piece as you return it to the box.

Here is the Good Shepherd. 
Look. The sheep. 
The water. 
The dangerous place. 
The sheepfold. 
The grass.

Take the parable box back to its shelf and return to the circle. Help the children decide what work they will get out.