

Sunday, September 15, 2019
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 19 (Year C)
Exodus 32.7-14; 1 Timothy 1.12-17; Luke 15.1-10
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We can all probably relate to the parables that Jesus tells to the Pharisees and scribes in today's Gospel reading. Okay, it's not likely that many of you have lost any sheep. But no matter how organized you are, at one time or another, you've likely lost something. Your car keys. Your cell phone. Your wallet. An important piece of paper. And of course, we never notice that something is lost or missing when we have free time to look for it. No, we generally notice something is lost at the worst possible moment. As we're getting ready to walk out the door to go to work or to an important appointment. So, now, not only is the item lost, but you are also forced to lose even more—valuable time and energy, not to mention your sanity—as you put the rest of life on hold to look for the lost item. The experience can be maddening. The feelings of frustration and irritation—possibly even anger at self—as you seek that which is lost. Yet, out of necessity, there is that determination to continue to search.

It's bad enough to have to find an inanimate object that is lost. Most of those things could be replaced if need be. But what about a person? Some of you may have had the misfortune of having a loved one—a child, a spouse, a parent—go temporarily missing. The feelings then ramp up exponentially. Not just frustration, but many others as well. Possibly anger. Possibly sadness. Almost certainly panic. And with all of that, out of love for the one who is lost, there is the unflinching determination to keep searching for as long as it takes.

Some of you may recall a story in the news about three and a half months ago. Amanda Eller, a 35-year-old yoga instructor and personal trainer, decided to go for a short hike in a forest preserve on Maui. It was a trail she knew well, having hiked it a number of times before. Intending to only take a short hike, she didn't bother to take any water or her cell phone. At one point on the hike, Amanda took a rest off the trail. After she rested a bit, she headed back to the trail. But she got turned around and instead of heading back to the trail, she ended up going deeper into the forest, becoming hopelessly lost. For several days. On the third day, she fell off a cliff and fractured her leg, rendering her unable to hike any further. She was now lost for even longer.

When it was discovered that Amanda was missing, search parties set out to try to find her. The official search was suspended a mere 72 hours after it began. But a dedicated group of volunteers persisted in their unofficial search for Amanda. The man coordinating the volunteers even got fired from his job for missing work. But the volunteers were determined to go on for as long as necessary. Their determination and persistence paid off. On the 16th day of their search, they found Amanda. She was injured, sunburned, hungry, and dehydrated, but alive.

That experience gives a sense of what is going on today's parables. For the shepherd. For the widow. And as Jesus seeks to convey through these parables, what God and Christ feel when one of their own—one of their beloveds—is lost. Their search for those who are lost is dogged

and persistent. They do not call it quits after a few days. They continue for as long as it takes, like the volunteers who ultimately found Amanda.

In both parables, Jesus is speaking specifically to God's determination in seeking out those who are sinners. Of those who have lost their way, taking them farther and farther from God's desire for us. We see something of this in our other readings for the day, as well.

In the Old Testament reading from Exodus, we witness a discussion—an argument, really—between God and Moses. Moses has gone up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. He is away for 40 days and the Israelites are starting to get nervous. They are feeling lost without their leader. And without their leader who was their direct connection to God, they are also feeling like God has abandoned them. So they turn to a god of their own making for comfort. In a vain hope of being found. But it's ultimately not the Golden Calf that finds them, that brings them comfort and solace. Rather, it is the Lord God. Yes, at first, he's more than a little ticked off that the people had turned to worshipping a false idol. He's all set to wash his hands of the Israelites. He says to Moses, "Your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have acted perversely" (Ex 32.7). Just like when a child is well-behaved, he is "our child," but when he is in trouble, he is "your child." God is all set to punish them for their infidelity. But Moses talks God down, gets him to see that they are afraid, feeling lost, and that what they really need is love and mercy. And so "the Lord changed his mind" and embraced them as his own once more. God recognizes that the people were actually lost and in need of being found. And in being found by God, the Israelites eventually make it to the Promised Land and become a great nation destined to be a blessing to all nations.

Paul's own story, which he summarizes in today's reading from his first letter to Timothy, also illustrates what it means to be lost and ultimately found. Paul confesses that he was once lost. As a zealot Jew, he was so set in his beliefs that he blasphemed against Jesus. In his zeal, he persecuted the followers of Jesus, often in violent ways. But then he was found. "I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 1.13b). He sums up his conversion experience by saying "The saying is true and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost" (1 Tim 1.15). And just look at what Paul went on to achieve. In being found, he became the apostle to the Gentiles and was responsible for helping the Gospel spread to the reaches of the known world.

It just goes to show that people who are lost still have value. As the Gospel parables illustrate, and as the experience of the Israelites and the Golden Calf and Paul's own account of his life demonstrate, we are all lost in some way. We hear about the God who desperately seeks out each and every one of us and celebrates when we are found again. Because each one of us matters beyond measure to God. We see in these readings the story of a God who never ceases searching for the lost. And that God does not wait for people to return to him. Rather, he actively seeks them out.

Every time we gather to worship, we are reminded of God seeking us. Our own worship structure mirrors the two parables in today's Gospel. Our own worship mirrors the experience of the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai. Our own worship mirrors Paul's conversion. We

start off hearing the Word of God—the lessons that instruct us on how we are to live according to God’s commandments. If we are honest with ourselves, we realize that we have fallen short in doing so. As we move through the Liturgy of the Word, we come to the Confession, where we publically recognize that we have indeed fallen short, and privately confess to God “what we have done and . . . what we have left undone” (BCP, 360). After the Absolution, we conclude the first part of the liturgy with the Peace, which was traditionally a sign of making amends with those whom we have sinned against, seeking reconciliation. We then move on to the Eucharist—the sacramental meal that is meant to be a foretaste, albeit symbolically, of the heavenly banquet. The heavenly banquet where all are welcome. The heavenly banquet where “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God” (Lk 15.10) over all who have repented and returned to God.

In our spiritual and religious journey, we often use the language of looking, of searching, with the goal of finding. For so many of us, this searching with the hope of finding is particularly applicable to our time in worship. We come in search of peace, rest, comfort, assurance or reassurance, hope. We often come in search of answers: what is God doing in my life? Why does God allow certain things to happen? Where is God in the brokenness and hurting of this world? Some come in search of community, friendship, hospitality. To be sure, we find all of these, to one degree or another, in the gathered community. In the Body of Christ.

The common thing in all of these reasons for being here, whether we recognize it or not, is that we come here because we are all lost. As Jesus seeks to address in his parables, we are all lost to sin to some extent. But we are also lost for other, more personal reasons. Lost to pain, sickness, anger, sadness, grief, anxiety, loneliness, uncertainty, fear, hopelessness; even lost to false gods. We come here and receive affirmation that we are indeed lost, as we somehow knew. Even as we might have feared. But ultimately, it is not we who do the finding. Rather, God has found us. God has brought us home. And, in so doing, God is beside himself with joy.