

Sunday, September 11, 2022
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 19 (Year C)

Luke 15.1-10

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/630313068692581>

(Sermon begins at about 17:00)

“Finding the Lost”

Before my parents got married, my mother was a bookkeeper for a printing company in her hometown in Kansas. She was very good at her job and had a reputation of being thorough and detail-oriented. Even though she gave up that job when my folks got married (and she had to move halfway across country to join my father who was stationed in North Carolina), those bookkeeping skills have remained with her to this day. As soon as Mom gets her bank statement, she sits down and reconciles her accounts. She is not comfortable until she knows every last penny is accounted for. And she has been known to spend hours, even days, trying to find even a few cents on those rare occasions when her statement and her check register do not agree. Not that a few cents would break the bank. But for Mom, it’s the principle of the thing. She just doesn’t feel at ease unless she knows that everything is balanced and reconciled. So, when she does find those missing few pennies, she is overjoyed. And relieved. I’m sure we can all relate to the relief of finding those few missing pennies in our check register or finding those keys or other item that somehow were misplaced. And we can all relate to the joy, the sense of relief, when we find what had been lost.

In our Gospel reading, we hear two well-known stories of searching for lost items. These parables are told to a mixed audience. Present are a group of tax collectors and other sinners. The other group present are religious officials—scribes and Pharisees—who are criticizing Jesus because he is hanging out with the aforementioned sinners. The stories are told primarily to comfort and reassure the sinners. But the stories also have the added purpose of putting in their place the judgmental religious officials, who think the sinners are irredeemably lost. The first story being of a shepherd looking for a lost sheep and the second being of a woman looking for a lost coin.

Both stories are about the search for something of value that has been lost. In the one case, a sheep, which would have essentially been a money-making asset for its owner. Depending on the market, for wool or for meat. And in the case of the woman, she has lost one-tenth of her life savings, with one coin being equivalent to a day’s wages. Jesus recognizes in the telling of these stories that the search is a given. Of course, any reasonable person would search for something of value that has been lost. Jesus’ real point is the rejoicing that occurs in the finding. As we well know from our own lives, there is always that sense of relief, even joy, when we find anything we have been searching for.

Jesus goes on to equate that sense of joy with the joy that God experiences when one of his beloved children has been lost and is eventually found. As Jesus says with respect to the finding of the lost sheep, “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over

ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” And as he says with respect to the finding of the lost coin, “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” The meaning is clear, there in black and white. When it comes to his beloved children who have become lost due to sin, our God is like the shepherd dropping everything to search for the lost sheep. Our God is like the woman tearing her house apart looking for the lost coin. Our God will not rest until those who are lost to sin are found, are redeemed, and are brought back to their rightful place in God’s kingdom.

Before we go on, a word about sin. We often think about a sin as being some egregious, immoral action that goes against God’s laws. Which is one definition. Although, in its simplest sense, sin is anything which separates us from God. It can be actions, it can be thoughts, it can be feelings. Anything that is counter to how God wants us to live and to be. Anything that effectively puts a barrier between us and God. Anything that creates a barrier to us receiving God’s love. And let’s be clear, God does not withhold his love because we sin. Our sin blocks us from being able to fully receive, to fully experience, God’s love. Sin is us pushing God away, be it intentionally or unintentionally. God does not push us away because we have sinned. Rather, as Jesus makes clear in today’s parables, God still loves us, even when we sin. When we sin, God moves heaven and earth to tear town those barriers, to seek us out, and to return us to right relationship with him.

Sin being what it is, there is agency on our part. We are responsible for our sin. Be it through action or inaction. Be it intentional or unintentional. The result is the same. Separation from God. Being lost. Now, the agency, and the reaction of the one who is lost, is something that we don’t generally consider in these parables. Perhaps it would help to look at the parables from the perspective of that which is lost, and what it means to them. Jesus doesn’t address this, but as in any parable, there is an unspoken invitation to enter into the story. And since it is pretty clear that we are not the shepherd or the woman—those represent God—then who are we, but the one who is lost? Who are we, but the sheep or the coin? Of course, we can’t really see how this might play out with the lost coin since coins are inanimate objects incapable of feeling. But sheep, on the other hand, are living beings, capable of agency, capable of thoughts and emotions about what is going on. So what was this like for the sheep?

In the parable, we are not told why the sheep is lost. It has obviously become separated from the rest of the flock. Perhaps it wandered off looking for some tastier grass to eat. Perhaps it was busy munching away and not paying attention, or perhaps it decided to take a nap in the warm sun, and did not realize that the rest of the flock moved on to another area. Perhaps it fell into danger of some sort. The specifics of what happens are not important. Something happened to result in the one sheep becoming separated from the flock, from the community. It could have been intentional on its part, or it could have been unintentional. Regardless, it became lost.

And what did the lost sheep feel? At first, there might have been a sense of excitement, of exhilaration, at being out on its own (although sheep are not normally that adventurous, but maybe this was an unusually independent sheep). Maybe there was a rush from being just a little bad and not following the rules, of not sticking with the rest of the flock. Maybe there was a sense of freedom at being able to do what it wanted. But as time went on, things would

undoubtedly change. When the sheep finally realizes that it's truly lost—be it through its own agency or because the flock inadvertently moved on without it—feelings would have changed. Very quickly, the sheep probably started to get scared, wondering how it would be able to find its flock. And being communal animals, it would probably start to feel alone, with an accompanying sense of sadness, wondering if it would ever see its friends, its home, again. Depending on circumstances, maybe even a sense of being abandoned. Again, depending on circumstances, there might even be a sense of regret for wandering off or not paying attention. A sense of frustration, even anger, at itself for having been foolish. A sense of embarrassment or shame at what the other sheep might think of it. Over time, it would probably become paralyzed with these many thoughts and emotions.

But then, just when all hope seems lost, it hears the voice of the shepherd. The sheep has been found. The sheep has been rescued. What a sense of joy and relief at being found. What a sense of humility at the thought that the shepherd would leave the 99 other sheep to search for the lost one. What a sense of being cared for and valued. What a sense of being loved.

When you look at the situation from the perspective of the lost sheep, it is easy to see how this is actually a pretty good analogy for those who become lost due to sin. How it is easy to slip into sin, either intentionally or unintentionally. And it is easy to see how, over time, being lost to sin can take its toll emotionally. To see the variety of emotions that can arise, particularly when we start to recognize our own sinfulness: fear, loneliness, sadness, regret, frustration, anger, embarrassment, shame.

But the parable does not focus on such negative emotions. Instead, they specifically note the rejoicing, the cause for celebration when that which has been lost has been found. Specifically noting that this is nothing compared to the rejoicing and cause for celebration in heaven when a sinner is found—when a sinner is given the opportunity to repent and return to right relationship with God and with the community. How much more still is the rejoicing of the sinner who repents, who turns from whatever had separated them from God, knowing that they are welcomed back into God's loving embrace?

We are all sinners. Each and every one of us. And you know what? That's okay. Because we are human. We are not perfect. Because the Church is not a place for those who are perfect. We are a place for sinners. A place where we are welcomed, no matter who we are. A place to come and be nurtured and cared for in our imperfection, in our brokenness. A place to allow us to reflect on who we are, despite our sinfulness. A place to show us who we can become. A place to wait in safety until the one who searches for us finds us. Or maybe, a place to wait until we are ready to be found by the one who searches for us. We are a place that rejoices and celebrates that ours is a God who loves us no matter what. We are a place that rejoices and celebrates that ours is a God who moves heaven and earth to find us and bring us home.