

Sermon for 14 Pentecost
September 14, 2025
Jeremiah 4: 11-12, 22-28
Psalm 14
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

“O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts.” That’s our theme this morning, in a nutshell. And while that might seem daunting at first – who wants to surrender their will in “all things” to God’s direction and instruction? Who among us really believes that we can’t do something pleasing to God without God’s help? – it’s also reassuring that it is possible to be so connected with God that we do in fact please God, when our hearts and minds and souls are in the right place. It’s not only possible – it’s necessary, if we want to build the kind of world that God envisions.

Staying connected to God has been a problem throughout religious history, one which affects all aspects of life. When we aren’t connected to God, we act in ways that are destructive to ourselves, to the community, and to the physical world. All we have to do is look at the world around us to see and hear the truth of that statement. So our collect and readings are a reminder that as much as we like to depend on ourselves – especially in this country, with our heritage of the merits of pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps – we can’t be the people God calls us to be without acknowledging our need for God’s help along the way.

Take our first reading as an example. This passage comes from the beginning of Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry, where Jeremiah sees in a vision what God has in store for God’s wayward people. These people have been in a covenant relationship with God for many generations, and they still have no idea how to behave in a Godly fashion, toward God or toward their neighbors. They treat each other, and their neighbors, with contempt. They run after the false idols of money, land, and power, rather than remaining true to God’s word. Despite God’s best efforts towards them, they are “skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good.” And so their fate, although they don’t know it yet, will be destruction. The kingdom of Judah will be laid waste; Jerusalem and the temple will be destroyed by Babylonian invaders; and the people will once again go into exile until they learn the truth of the statement that “without God, they are not able to please God.”

The psalm continues the same theme. God looks down from heaven to see if anyone still desires to know God and follow in God's ways...and God is disappointed. "There is none who does any good; all alike have turned bad." Luckily, there are still a few who can be found "in the company of the righteous," who know that without God, they can do nothing. And God is willing and able to use those few to help bring the people back into relationship with God, no matter who they are, no matter how strange the messengers may appear when they do appear. Because God always stands ready to welcome those who repent and want to return to God's ways, who desire the graces that come from being in right relationship with God.

Paul, in the first letter to Timothy, reminds his readers that this has happened in his life. In fact, he says that he is the prime example of God's forgiveness and grace. He was "formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence," someone who tried to wipe out the Christian faith from the earth. And yet, God knew that Paul was a better person than his actions indicated. So God sought Paul as a disciple, gave him what he needed to become a believer, and then used him to become one of the great apostles of the church, someone who could reach out to the Gentiles because he knew, heart-deep and soul-deep, that there was no one outside the reach of God's love. Paul knew how important it was – and is – to continually repent and seek God's help, to do our best to have the Holy Spirit direct and rule our hearts and our entire lives. And although it may make us uncomfortable – because who really likes admitting their faults and their brokenness? – admitting that we aren't perfect, that God has sometimes used us despite ourselves, is one of the most effective ways possible to help those outside the walls, those who have been told overtly or implicitly that they have to be perfect to follow God's call.

This is a lesson that the Pharisees and the scribes in this morning's gospel have yet to learn. Remember, these are the religious leaders of their time. These are the people who should be rejoicing when someone repents of their sins and returns to the Lord; these are the people who supposedly are so steeped in the knowledge of God that they should be the first to welcome the sinner home. Unfortunately, that's not the case. When they see the tax collectors and the sinners coming to hear Jesus, they grumble! They not only don't like the fact that "those people" are hearing the word of God and repenting, they use that fact as a means of casting doubt on Jesus' mission as well. For after all, if "this fellow" welcomes sinners and eats with sinners, he must be a sinner himself. Right?

Thankfully, no. Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with sinners because they are the ones who most need his welcome. These are the people who are most in need of being reconnected with God, most in need of receiving the continuing gift of the Spirit to keep them on the right path. Jesus reminds the scribes and the Pharisees, and everyone else who is listening to him, that it's human nature to look for what we lose, particularly when we lose something valuable. The shepherd looks for his lost sheep; the woman looks for her lost coin. Today, we might say that we look for the lost ATM card, or cell phone, or driver's license... whatever it is that has a big impact on our life when it's lost, and will be a great relief when it's found. And Jesus goes on to say that if we look so hard for what we lose, and we celebrate when we find it, how much more do you think God searches when one of God's children is lost? And how much more does God celebrate when God finds the lost soul?

And not only that: look at how each of those two parables ends. In each case, the shepherd and the woman call their friends and neighbors and say "Rejoice with me! I have found what is lost!" God is not just celebrating alone. God calls all of us to rejoice when the lost person returns, rather than being like the Prodigal Son's brother, who complains that the one who returns has "gotten more than he deserves." Friends, we all get more than we deserve. So God calls all of us to join in the search, to be looking both within the walls, as the woman does, and outside the walls, as the shepherd does, for people who are lost because they haven't heard and understood what it is that God wants them to do with their lives.

This isn't just an individual issue, however. As a community, we all need to be more like God and reach out to others. We all need to look for people who would be a good fit to join this community, and invite them in... or invite them to come back. There are adults and children out there whom we haven't seen for a long time. Who among us will take the first step and reach out to them? To ask them how they are, and invite them to come back? And there are people out there who are strangers to us right now, but who would make our community even better than it is if they joined us in our work. Who will look for them diligently and invite them to come in? And perhaps most important of all – how will we as a community act when these people do come? Will we welcome them, and have a party, and rejoice that they have found us? Or will we worry about how much disruption and change these new people will cause?

One final point. It's not only a case of how well we do this on the church level, or the community level. We need to do this on a national, a global, level as well. I don't mean that we need to go back to the days of the *conquistadores* and forcibly

try to convert people to Christianity. That doesn't work. But the world as a whole is lost and lonely and hurting. All we have to do is look at or listen to the news, or read the nasty comments flying back and forth on social media, to know that we all are desperately in need of God's help, directing and ruling our hearts and minds and souls. All of us. The world truly, deeply needs what we have to offer; and more, we are truly, deeply incomplete as a community and as a world until all the lost and the lonely and the hurting have a place they can call home. So I am asking us all to consider the following ideas this week and beyond: that we all stand in need of God's forgiveness and God's love; that we all have something to repent; and that we all need each other, no matter how different we may seem on the surface. In our hearts, we are all the same – we are all lost until we see the need for God to direct our lives, and we are all incomplete until the whole family is gathered at the table. Let all of us rush to be the first to seek out the lost and the lonely, the tax collector and the sinner, to share our kinship with them, and to bring them back to the fold. And let all of us then rejoice when join with us. Let us be the first to not only proclaim resurrection to those most in need of it, but also to work to make it a reality.

Amen.