

September 11, 2022

Year C; Proper 19

Psalm 14

1 Timothy 1: 12-17

Luke 15: 1-10

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

The color of the sky stays with me, stays with so many of us, a clear blue sky after the haze and humidity of the long summer. I was walking back from an opening of school worship service, relieved to be through this first service of the year with over 900 boys, faculty, and staff together.

I walked back chatting with our new principal, Dave, in his first full week with us, when the news of the first plane hitting the World Trade Center came to us.

The chaos, fear, and horror of the day unfolded as we struggled to keep the

day normal for the boys, as parents came by, terrified for spouses in New York or DC or on flights, teachers and staff checking on family. All of us simply wanting to hold those we loved in our arms, whether they were across town in Richmond or faraway, or somewhere, hopefully, in Manhattan.

As the day finally ended, and the days of that week stretched on, more and more the news showed us the spaces in NY filling with Have you Seen? and Missing posters. These small signs were everywhere, growing rapidly from dozens to hundreds to thousands, as folks tried to find loved ones, lost in the chaos? Or lost? Alive or dead? Calling and calling their phones over and over, trying to find the one they had lost. The signs covered walls and fences, desperate searches for a wonderful face smiling off a photo. Lost smiling faces.

As the reality hit that the lost would not be found, rain came into the New York area at week's end, bringing a fog and damp to the World Trade center site, as firefighters and others continued the sacred work that would go on for months of looking for remains, bits of those beloved smiling lives.

The sadness swelled and deepened as we grieved the lost together as a country, and as we briefly dropped old battles, and grieved as one world.

We grieved and remembered and cried for and memorialized the almost 3000 lost on September 11, 2001, in New York, at the Pentagon in DC, and in a field in Pennsylvania.

Our gospel today tells two of the familiar lost stories that Jesus told, the lost sheep and the lost coin. Luke introduces these parables at a time of tension, as those with power were criticizing Jesus, muttering that Jesus was known to be friendly to sinners, warmly receiving them, and even worse, sharing meals with them, a sign of acceptance and friendship.

And so, Jesus told two stories of being lost. A sheep wanders off and gets lost, and a coin is dropped and is missing, lost. And a shepherd and

astoundingly, a woman, are the God figures in these stories. We are familiar with God as our shepherd, a few of our hymns today remind us of that deeply comforting image.

But the writer of Luke slips in a startling female image of God, a woman working tirelessly to find a coin, sweeping and searching with her broom to find the precious and lost.

We do well to not miss how the writer of Luke, who often allowed those without voices to talk, offers us an opportunity to stretch our minds and see our God in both the feminine and the masculine, and beyond, to see our God as guiding us with both the shepherd's crook and the cleaner's broom.

Returning to those lost, we humans like coins and sheep, get lost in so many ways over our lifetimes.

We see today, September 11th, the aching and sorrow-filled loss of those killed, and of those yearning to find them, lost in grief and despair, ringing phones long dropped.

We humans too get lost, like those crowding around Jesus, as outcasts, in those days prostitutes, lepers, tax collectors, the ill and the widows, the orphans and the unloved. And stunned to receive a smile and an invitation to eat together, to not be alone, but to be included to be loved.

In 2022 we can be lost in grief, in addiction, in job loss, in debt, in anger, in politics, in despair, we wander off, we are misplaced, we are far from home.

The parables Jesus told to those leaders and those sinners thousands of years ago, and that Jesus tells us leaders and sinners today, teach us that God is unrelenting in seeking each of us. That God, like the shepherd, like the woman, will not stop, will search onward into the night, until our lost selves are found and brought home.

In being found by God we ought not think all is solved and we will have no more problems, no more pain. We may not even be alive in being found, we

are all mortal, from dust and to dust we shall return.

Being found does not mean the planes will not fall from the sky; being found means God falls with us, and catches us, and bears us home.

Being found by God means we are not alone, being found means we belong to God, that nothing can separate us from God and from God's love, in this life and the life to come.

Those heartrending signs 21 years ago on fences, on walls in New York,
Have you seen? Please call. Lost beloveds.

And a woman with a broom and a shepherd with a crook quietly walked the streets too, finding them and leading them all home.

Amen.