

Pentecost 17C (9/11/2016)

Exodus 32:7-14

Psalm 51:1-10

1 Timothy 1:12-17

**Luke 15:1-10**

*Faith is not about seeking, but rather being sought. We don't find God, but God finds us. Even when we resist being found, God embraces us with a transformative love, an abundant mercy that is finally a cause for joy.*

One of my earliest memories is of being lost at the fair. I was about two years old at the time, the same age Alex is now. My own memory of the incident is blurry and partial, but I've been able to piece together details of the story based on my parents' recollection. Apparently, we were all visiting the rabbits, but when the rest of my family moved on, I lingered for a moment, then wandered away. It's every parent's nightmare. My father thought my mother had me. My mother thought my father had me. My grandmother, who had my older sister, thought my mother or my father had me. We were only separated for a split second, but suddenly I was gone.

My memory of the time that followed involves mostly the sense of being smaller than everyone else, and dreading the sight and sound of a specific carnival ride, a steel column attached to two rotating arms that cracked loudly with burst of air every time they lifted the cars at either end into the sky. Of what little I remember clearly, I remember keeping my distance from that ride.

Fortunately, a concerned stranger noticed me and accompanied me to the lost children's station, where I was eventually reunited with my parents. They had been scouring the fairgrounds for what felt like an eternity, and had already visited the lost children's station more than once. What's worse, my father had recently seen a

documentary about child abduction, which led him to imagine the unimaginable. Needless to say, their search had been frantic and all-consuming, as all other considerations fell away until they found me. Equally intense was the feeling of relief at having me back.

We all have a sense of what it's like to be lost. It's the confusion of drifting through unknown surroundings, of losing your sense of place and direction. It's the anxiety of being alienated from what's familiar and safe. It's the discomfort of wandering aimlessly, of taking hesitant steps toward nothing in particular. This is why the notion of being lost is so powerful in both literal and figurative terms. It's the quintessential experience of separation and vulnerability, isolation and insecurity.

Our Gospel from Luke today includes two famous parables that speak to the experience of being lost. A sheep, meandering away from the flock, suddenly finds itself alone in the wild, defenseless against any number of dangers. A silver coin, falling to the floor, suddenly finds itself hidden in a darkened corner of the house, out of view of the woman who had scraped and saved to possess it in the first place.

When we take a closer look, however, we see that **the Parables of the Lost and Found are less about being lost and more about being found. Or, more precisely, these parables are less about the one who is lost and more about the one who searches and finds.** Jesus mentions virtually nothing about the sheep, but rather describes the shepherd who *leaves the others behind, goes after the lost sheep, carries it to safety on his shoulders, and rejoices with friends and neighbors.* Jesus mentions virtually nothing about the coin, but rather describes the woman

who *lights a lamp, sweeps every inch of her house, searches carefully, and rejoices* at finding it. So, perhaps these Parables of the Lost and Found are more rightly called the Parables of the One who seeks the Lost.

This is a remarkable insight in light of our common understanding of faith as the human quest for God. “Have you found Jesus?” Lieutenant Dan Taylor asks Forrest Gump when they are reunited after returning from the Vietnam War. Fellow veterans are busily proselytizing Dan at the VA, and he echoes their question: “Have you found Jesus?” In his endearingly earnest way, Forrest replies, “I didn’t know I was supposed to be looking for him, sir.” Isn’t that the way of faith? **Like a helpless sheep or a missing coin, we are powerless to reunite ourselves with the God who makes, redeems, and sustains us. So, our faith is not about seeking, but rather being sought. We don’t find God, but God finds us.**

For those of us whose hearts are restless, the notion of being found in God is a relief, like the feeling of being reunited with a loved one after an unanticipated separation. But, what about those of us who are reluctant to be found? What does it mean, after all, that God is searching for us? Think of Adam and Eve who hear God calling to them in the garden, and who hide themselves out of fear and shame.<sup>1</sup> If God is a threatening figure, pursuing us like a predator pursues its prey, then we, too, might be more inclined to hide than repent.

The good news for those of us who would rather not be found is that **God not only seeks us out, but rejoices at finding us:** “I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3:8-10.

need no repentance.” Make no mistake: repentance is difficult. It means honestly acknowledging the ways we are lost – facing up to the isolation and aimlessness and anxiety in our lives – and becoming receptive to being found.<sup>2</sup> In other words, **repentance means *letting go and letting God*.**

Given this condition, maybe we would prefer to stay lost. At least we’d be lost on our own terms. But ***letting go and letting God* means being swept up into the arms of a loving Parent – One who stops at nothing to find us even if when we resist being found – and who celebrates by calling together friends and neighbors for a party: “Rejoice with me, for I have found the one that was lost.”** Take a look around: here are the guests; here’s the food and the wine. God has already sought each one of us out and embraced us with a transformative love, **an abundant mercy that is finally a cause for joy.**

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<sup>2</sup> See Scott Bader-Saye, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, 70.