

## **September 11, 2016**

### Synopsis:

I would imagine that at some point, or many points, we have all lost something important to us. Think about the time you spent looking for it and the joy when it was found. Our God is so good and loves us so much that God searches for us whenever we are lost and celebrates when we are found. Unfortunately, not all things that are lost can be found. 15 years ago today our country and our lives were changed. Many lives were lost and there were also many losses to our dreams and our assumptions about life.

The empty chair calls us to remember in whatever way is most important to you. As we worship let us be open to the Immortal, invisible God who searches for the lost, and when the lost cannot be restored, in the ways that we would hope, God searches and finds the new possibilities.

### Morning Prayer

(Prayer for anniversary of 9/11 by Rev. Jeremy Pridgeon)

Our loving God, as we come to you in prayer today, we remember how our world was shaken 15 years ago today. The shock and horror of that tragic day have subsided but have been replaced with an emptiness, a longing for an innocence lost. We come remembering those who lost their lives in New York, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania.

We are mindful of the sacrifice of public servants who demonstrated the greatest love of all by laying down their lives for friends. We commit their souls to your eternal care and celebrate their gifts to a fallen humanity.

We come remembering and we come in hope, not in ourselves, but in you.

As foundations we once thought secure have been shaken, we are reminded of the illusion of security.

In commemorating this tragedy, we give you thanks for your presence in our time of need.

We know that you are always present with us in our time of need and today we are grateful for your presence with ...

Text: I Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

Title: "Lost and Found"

When you hear the parables from Luke about the shepherd looking for a lost sheep, and a woman sweeping her house to find a lost coin, what do you think? If you were to place yourself in the story where would you be? Would you be the sheep or the coin that was lost? Would you be the shepherd or the woman searching diligently and then rejoicing? Would you be in the crowd that comes to rejoice when what was lost is finally found?

Generally, I would have quickly answered that I was the lost sheep or coin and that I was grateful that God went searching for me even when I didn't know I was lost. As I have studied and prepared for today, I am seeing more and more layers and complications in this wonderful chapter, a chapter that some have called "the gospel in the gospel".

First, I would get excited about the promise that is part of the obvious story line here. That God is like the shepherd or woman who searches diligently for the lost until it is found and then rejoices and celebrates. In this parable, the shepherd has 99 sheep that are safe and still with him, and yet he leaves them to go find the one that has wandered off. I wondered about the question, "Which of you would...?" Was the obvious answer all of us, or none of us? I wondered why a shepherd would leave 99 sheep to go find one that was lost. Why would he put the other 99 in potential danger without him to protect them? Wouldn't they also likely wander off if left alone. He might come back with the lost one to discover that the other 99 are now scattered and missing. I have visions of a cartoon of finding one and leaving that to go find others that have

wandered away, bringing them back and having to leave them to go find others that wandered off, and never having the 100 sheep together in one place. This does remind me though that God treasures every child in God's family, and when one goes missing, God goes into search mode. The community is not complete until all of the sheep are safely back.

Some have explained this by saying that in many villages, the sheep were put together and tended by several shepherds, so while one shepherd would definitely go off to look for the one that was lost, and there would be great rejoicing when it was found, the other 99 were never in danger.

I have read that a lost sheep will not do anything to let the shepherd know where it is. Sheep like to be together, so a sheep that is lost will not bleat out of fear, but will curl up and lie down. A lost sheep cannot help in its own rescue.

The coin certainly cannot help itself be found. Yet, in Jesus' story the woman searches and searches until she finds the coin. While she is not putting anything else in danger while searching for the coin, she is neglecting her daily work and she undoubtedly had a full day of work to do just for her family to survive. She needed to get water – often at a distance, prepare a fire, go to the market, prepare and cook food, wash clothes and likely many other things – none of which were done while she was sweeping and searching in a dark room, on a floor covered with straw. Finding a lost coin would be like trying to find the proverbial needle in a haystack. Yet, she searches and searches until she finds it.

Like the coin and the sheep, we may not know when we are lost. I would imagine that the sheep just slowly wandered eating grass until finally wandering far enough away that it was no longer in sight of the shepherds. I think that in general, people don't really know when they are lost. If

someone has never really experienced the love of God and been able to identify it, then that person has no idea what he or she is missing. You may feel like there should be more, but not know what it is. Children who are constantly criticized do not know what it is like to be praised. Children growing up in a war zone or in extreme poverty do not know that there is another world where people go to bed feeling safe at night, with full stomachs, or even have a bed in which to sleep.

There are many who know what it is to be loved, may have known and loved God and felt God's love but something happens and they start to get distracted or wander off. It may be a question of faith, why did God let this (whatever it is) happen. There may be feelings of being let down, or disappointed and if those feelings are allowed to fester, then we can start to withdraw until we have wandered off enough that we are lost and don't know how to find our way back.

The good news in this is that God is constantly searching and reaching out wanting to bring us back.

There are other perspectives on this story as well. For some reason, I don't remember ever really paying attention to the first verse in this chapter. Jesus was surrounded by the tax collectors and the sinners who were eagerly listening to everything Jesus had to say, and the Pharisees and the Scribes were complaining about Jesus spending time with these sinners and even eating with them – a definite no-no.

The Tax collectors and the sinners had placed themselves in a position where they could be found. They had recognized something about Jesus and wanted to know more. Sometimes that is true for us as well and for others. Sometimes people do place themselves where they might be

able to experience God's love, where they might be able to be found, where they are reaching out for something, as scary as it might be to do so.

A few years ago at church conferences, I was using a short video that has an image that continues to haunt me. It showed a church sanctuary and a woman sitting by herself in the last pew, as close to the window as possible. The video asked, "when will we remember that the very act of walking inside a church may be an act of courage." To the person wanting to place him or herself where they might be found, wanting to expose him or herself to what the church might have to offer, searching, seeking reaching out, to even walk through our doors takes courage.

You just never know what you will find when you venture through those doors. Will you find a place where people welcome you or will you find a place where people are so wrapped up in themselves that they ignore you? Will you find a worship service and a sermon that proclaims God's love or will you find judgement and condemnation? Will the way you are dressed be okay? Will you sit in someone else's seat? Will you know what to do? It can be very frightening to walk through the doors of a church.

I would imagine that the tax collector and sinners hanging around Jesus might have been aware of that, because the Pharisees and the scribes – the good church people – were busy complaining about the kind of people with whom Jesus was hanging around. It was in direct response to their grumbling and complaining that Jesus told these stories.

There was a way, a prescribed way, for sinners to become part of the community, but once again, Jesus shakes all of that up. Imagine telling a story in which you compare God to a smelly shepherd an outcast. Imagine

telling a story in which God is pictured as a woman – and not just any woman, but one neglecting her duties to search for a lost coin.

People who wanted to be restored to the community, were to repent, to be purified, to go through the right steps, follow the laws, do what was right. Instead, Jesus tells stories about sheep and coins that do nothing to help themselves but who are not only searched for but found and then a great party is held.

For the Pharisees and the scribes this is a call to rejoice in the celebration. This is a call to get excited about welcoming the one who is lost and to whenever possible be part of the welcoming and finding. This is one reason why it is so important for us to surround in prayer those who express that need, so that they may truly feel and know that whatever is happening in their lives they are not alone but are being carried, loved and surrounded by people who care.

I was very touched this week, when I was called at the last minute and asked if I could do a service at a funeral home for a woman who had died. I knew nothing about the woman, and had only a short time to prepare. While, I like to be able to talk about the person who died, I could not do that in this situation, but I could bring the good news that neither she nor her family were alone during this time. I could bring the good news of Jesus Christ and a promise that God loves and care for all of them. And while I didn't specifically say this, I meant that God's love and care for them was not dependent upon how they felt about God or whether they knew God at all.

I will likely never see anyone from that family again, but I do believe it is one way of planting a seed, of sharing God's love in a way that may

make a difference to someone and I pray brought some comfort to them in their grief.

We have many opportunities to participate in this searching and finding. They can be as simple as praying for someone, sending a card, supporting a mission. In the future you may hear more about a girl who is very special to me. She wanted to know why Christians half way across the world were working to raise money for her to have lifesaving surgery. When told that it was because they were Christians and they were doing what Jesus wanted them to do. She said, "That is why I want to know this Jesus." Ask God to show you the ways you can be part of the lost and found mission of God.

I feel compelled to stretch this parable and metaphor just a little bit, so please bear with me. We know that not everything that is lost can be found. Sometimes, we lose what is extremely precious to us. Our country lost something precious 15 years ago. When someone we love deeply dies, we have lost something very precious. When health or circumstances take away an important part of our life, we have lost something that cannot be found again and we cannot make things exactly the way they were before.

When those things happen, we are often devastated. Yes, we do know that in some way we can continue and we will adapt, but life is incomplete. Part of the whole that we knew is missing. I believe that in those times, God still comes alongside us and God helps in the search for the new reality, for the way to live life in the fullest ways possible.

Think about the times when we celebrate Holy Communion. We remember what happened that night. Jesus told his disciples, "whenever

you eat and drink, do this in remembrance of me.” We remember, not just to recall the past, but to bring the past into the present and the future.

We remember that Jesus died a gruesome death. His “body was broken and his blood was spilled not in a glass and steel tower, but on a wooden cross. When we remember Jesus at his table, we realize that he is with us now, present in a powerful way, transforming our todays and our tomorrows.

“When we remember September 11 – also known as 9/11, we should be focusing on how the events of 2001 can shape 2016, and how our memory of the past can transform our actions in the future.”<sup>i</sup> In particular 9/11 can inspire us not to demonize a whole group of people who are also God’s children, but to be sure that we reach out to those who are easily excluded and to rejoice when they are included. We can remember the heroic efforts of so many that day and pledge to be part of future efforts to seek and save the lost.

When someone we love dies, we can remember and celebrate their lives but also seek ways to live our lives fully because of their presence in our lives. When life situations change drastically, we can join with God in seeking what we can carry into a new reality and what new possibilities will exist for us to live as the people God wants us to be under the new circumstances.

We remember that the sheep and the coin didn’t do anything to be found and saved. Whatever is happening in our lives, we are never beyond the long loving reach of God – the God who will travel into the thicket to pull us out and who crawls into the hole we have dug to lift us up and out.<sup>ii</sup>

Sometimes we are the lost. Sometimes we are part of the search party. Always let us be part of the celebration party.

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- <sup>i</sup> Proclamation – Sermon website.
  - <sup>ii</sup> Barclay?