

Sermon for September 18, 2016 – “Lost and Found”

25th Sunday in OT, Year C – Text: Luke 15:1-10 (11-32)

An airport employee found a cell phone that had been lost in one of the boarding areas. She took it to the lost and found office and switched it on hoping a caller would identify the owner. As soon as she did this, the phone rang. She answered it but there was no response. When it rang a second time, another female employee answered, and the same thing happened. Moments later, a supervisor came by and picked up the ringing phone. “This is Bob, may I help you?” “Bob,” a bewildered woman caller finally spoke, “where’s Bill...“And who are those two women he’s with?”

Jesus puts before his audience two stories of lost and found. In each case, the one who loses goes to extraordinary efforts to find what’s been lost. Having recovered it, the finder calls upon the surrounding community to join in rejoicing that the lost has been found. Jesus applies both stories to what happens when even one sinner repents, He tells us that there’s abundant joy in heaven. All well and good, we may say. There’s reason to rejoice in such circumstances. A shepherd leaves his big flock in someone else’s care we hope, to search out a single sheep that is missing. A woman turns the house upside down sweeping in every dark corner to find a valuable coin that is, perhaps, part of her dowry. There’s abundant rejoicing when the single lost sheep – when the lone lost coin – is found. I think it’s safe to say that we all want to believe in a God who searches for the lost and celebrates when the lost are found. We all want to believe that God feels it more deeply when people stray away than we do. When our cell phone, or our car keys are nowhere to be found.

But there’s another side to our reaction of these stories, What happens next? What happens once the sheep’s back with the flock? When the silver coin is back with the others? When we have in hand once again our cell phone or our car keys? What happens after the sinner repents and does a 180-degree turn? Is there more to the story?

Jesus speaks of one sheep that strays and the 99 who do not. He also distinguishes between one person who repents and the “Ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.” I wonder if maybe Jesus says that line with a slight smile on his lips. I wonder if maybe he meant that those 99 simply **believe** they need no repentance when, in fact, they need it as much as the one identified “sinner.” Their belief that they’re righteous is mistaken. If so, then the distinction is not between one sinner who repents and 99 other people who do not need to do so...The distinction is between those aware of their need for repentance and those unaware that they have this need. Keeping all this in mind, therefore, we may reach the conclusion that there are only two options for any of us 1) we can be a single lost sheep... OR 2) we can belong to the flock who mistakenly believe themselves to be righteous. Let me put it another way. We can either be, 1) a single lost coin, or 2) we can be a coin, along with others, that rests self-satisfied in some secure place. Indeed, these two options appear in the framework that surrounds the stories under consideration.

Looking at it, we see that the “recognized” sinners draw close to Jesus. These are people on the margins of society. They’re condemned by the power structure. Condemned, even, by themselves. The Pharisees and scribes on the other hand keep their distance from Jesus and murmur against Him. They enjoy positions of respect and, in general, hold themselves in fairly high esteem. Is there perhaps another alternative? What about those of us who are not blind to our failings, but whose sinfulness does not cause us to be exiled?

Well, there **is** an alternative and it's found at the heart of the gospel. To recognize it we must turn away from two misleading notions. The first is that repentance, conversion, whatever you call it, is a once-in-a-lifetime event, a one-and-done kind of a deal. The second misleading notion is that a conventional lifestyle can take the place of complete and radical obedience to God's will. The alternative is to recognize that each and every of us, on a regular basis, turns out to be a lost sheep, that each of us is the precious coin that disappears, the car keys that get mislaid, or the cell phone that gets lost and annoyingly cannot be found. And when we realize just how lost we sometimes are – what then? What does God do? God, like a shepherd with no common sense, leaves the rest of the flock and goes out to find us. God, like a housewife gone berserk, tears the place apart, searches every dark corner in order to find us. This is what happens in the lives of God's people over and over and over again. This is God's pattern ...

Our gospel reading this morning takes place as Jesus is travelling to Jerusalem, and when you think about it, this journey, this act of going to people, reflects that pattern of God throughout the ages. This is how God works, coming to His people, seeking them, searching for them repeatedly, calling them to keep their side of the bargain, and still promising to be with them always. That's the remarkable thing about God's grace. It's always fresh, always new enough to startle us.

But there's a problem and Jesus recognized it. In spite of God coming to His people, in spite of the longing, the searching, in spite of God's continual offering of love and mercy, in spite of **all** of these things...People resist and even reject God and God's promises. It's a pattern as old as the human heart. The Old Testament is full of stories of resistance and rejection. It goes back to the very beginning, remember the story of Adam and Eve in the garden? God loves them and comes to them in the cool of the morning, but they resisted and rejected the love of God. This is just the first of many stories, and for the life of me, I don't understand them any more than I understand the occasional resistance in my own soul, or the rejection exhibited in my own heart, but I know it's there and that it takes many forms.

Yet **still** God comes...**Still** God invites...**Still** God seeks us...**Still** God longs for us... We've an invitation and the invitation is to recognize that God diligently seeks us no matter who we are, where we are, or what we've done. It's an invitation to hear God's promises in a fresh and new way. It's an invitation to move beyond our fear, beyond our own resistance, shame, guilt, or rejection, beyond all of these things to the love, forgiveness, mercy, and amazing grace of God. We can't cause the sun of God's love to shine on us. All we can do is turn to the sunlight and be grateful. All we can do is make repentance a regular part of our lives.

Now, practicing repentance may sound burdensome. It may not sound like something we need to do. It may seem like a practice oriented to the past, one that's preoccupied with things like regret. Or guilt. But repentance, **true** repentance, is actually the exact opposite of preoccupation with regret, guilt, or anything else that gets in the way of being the people that we've been created and called to be.

The New Testament Greek word for repentance is metanoia and it means – literally – a change of mind, a moving away from the past, in preparation for a better future. **Our** metanoia can be – actually, it **needs** to be – a matter of **will** as well as a matter of **habit**. We must recognize our constant need for it because as John's first letter reminds us if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. And the truth is, as Paul reminds us, that all sin and fall short of the glory of God.

The good news is that we have practices to help us with this. One of them is as simple as the regular recitation of the Lord's Prayer with its request: Forgive us our sins, our debts, our trespasses. That's metanoia, our request that we **not** be stuck in our sins, that we not be stuck in our mistaken sense of righteousness. Another helpful practice is an expansion of this one, namely, the Prayer of Confession, which in one form or another is part of our weekly worship. We engage time after time in this communal exercise. In it, we see ourselves and one another **not** as the 99 who supposedly need no repentance but as the one sheep that has strayed and needs to be found and returned to the fold. This holds true of everyone. From the worst reprobate to the most splendid saint. We all need to repent and the prayer we say together every week is a good place to start.

It seems to me that Christianity is loaded with paradoxes. Here's another one. And here, brothers and sisters is the thing, each of us is a sheep at once both lost **and** found. We're all valuable coins lost **and** found. Car keys lost **and** found. Cell phones lost **and** found. You may have noticed that I've moved the Confession portion of our service to follow the sermon. As we pray together the unison Prayer of Confession I'd like you all to do something for me. I'd like you to pay very close attention to realize that what you're doing, what we're **all** doing. What we do each week is cause for abundant joy in heaven and that through continuing openness to the grace of God our hearts are kept from being either swamped by sin or hardened by self-righteousness. Through continuing openness to grace of God we declare our allegiance to the One who never stops looking for us. And who never will!

Time and again we decide to trust, not in our own devices, but in the future that God intends for us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.