

PROPER NINETEEN, PENTECOST 14, YEAR C, SEPTEMBER 11 2022

I don't know about you but it seems the older I get the more time I spend looking for things I've misplaced. Whether it is car keys, cell phone, glasses or papers I've spent more time looking for these things because they are important for me to function. But then there are the little things that we sometimes lose, that are not really important but they just drive you crazy because you can't find them. The worst part is spending all that time looking for something that really doesn't matter.

But we all have things that matter that do get lost like pets. I think every dog I've owned has had wander lust and have spent many hours searching for them. However, if you have had an animal get lost you know or can imagine what it's like to have a child wander off. I have no doubt that all have us have had an experience like that. Whether that has been in a store, in the neighborhood, or an amusement park, we all know the heart pounding, gut wrenching panic we feel until the child is found. And we turn over everything to the point of exhaustion in order to find that child. Many years ago one of my nieces, who was four at the time, decided to go for a walk. My sister was in the basement doing laundry and when she came upstairs she realized that not only Jilian was missing but also my dog Samantha who they were dog sitting. My sister frantically searched the neighboring yards, had the whole neighborhood looking for her and was on the verge of calling the police when she looked down the street and saw my niece with my dog rounding the corner. Jilian calmly said she had decided she had to take Samantha for a walk – but who walked whom is still debatable. Needless to say, the relief that was felt that she was back safe and sound goes beyond words.

Today we heard Jesus' story about the shepherd who had a hundred sheep and loses one of them. It was obviously upsetting and worrying to the shepherd that one of his sheep was no longer under his protection and was somewhere out there in the hills alone and afraid. Because of his concern for this one lost sheep drastic measures needed to be taken. He leaves the 99 sheep in the wilderness (which seems to be a silly idea since they would be left unprotected) and goes looking for that one sheep.

Then there is the other story about the woman with 10 silver coins who loses one and turns her house upside down looking for that one coin. In looking at these two stories we first of all think there is clearly something wrong, something seriously wrong with this shepherd. To care that much and give that much and risk that much for one little lamb either means that you are foolish...or that you have a love and compassion that goes beyond anything we can imagine. Same thing is true about the woman. The fact that she threw a party because she found a lost coin seems a little bit over the top.

There are a number of points that can be drawn from these stories, but I want to focus in on just one today. This is a story about God.

That is why our gospel lesson is so important today. It tells us that God is searching for us. The scripture today reminds us that God seeks us as a friend, or a parent or relative. God searches for us as the shepherd for the lost sheep, the woman for the lost coin. These stories eloquently tell us how God's heart aches and yearns to bring every sheep into God's fold, to tuck every coin safely into her purse. God celebrates when everyone is found.

Here is what I hear Jesus saying to you and me this morning. This is about the depth of pain and longing God feels for you and me when we are lost—and by "lost" I

mean the whole range of things from loneliness, alienation, and sorrow to self-destructive behavior. The best analogy for how God feels about us is the pain and longing we feel when we lose someone we desperately and deeply love. Just as sheep and coins are valuable to their owners, just as those who have died are precious to the bereaved, so you and I are worth something to God beyond what we can measure. That is true whether you are an upstanding citizen or an addict. All of us are precious in ways we have not even yet begun to understand. And true human wisdom comes when we begin to treat each other—and ourselves—in the light of our true and abiding value.

The stories Jesus tells in today's Gospel subverts Christianity's notion of God as a powerful, divine monarch passing judgement. Rather Jesus continues to represent God as a grief-stricken shepherd and poor woman in search of what they have lost. The point here is pretty obvious but needs to be constantly re-stated. God is not a royal king sitting on a throne passing sentences on lowly subjects. God is instead a poor woman or an anxious shepherd. What God cares about is you. You are precious to God. More than that: you are worth everything to God. Live your life in the light of that truth. Because just as you and I are precious, so is every human being and creature in God's world.

Through these parables Jesus is saying that every effort should be made to recover those who are lost. With the parable of the lost sheep he is demonstrating that even strays are valuable to God. And with the coin he is saying that everyone has value and is worth going after. There are no write-offs in the Kingdom of God.

So, we need to ask ourselves, who have we written off in our society? Not just individuals but whole groups of people. We have a responsibility to gather into the fold all people who have been excluded and made to feel and believe they are less for the color of their skin, their ethnicity, their culture, their economic status, their sexual orientation and their religious beliefs. Everyone is worthy of God's grace. Anyone who is lost deserves to be found. Anyone who we have pushed out of the fold needs to be brought back in. We worship a God who cares about the lost and the disenfranchised. We are created by a God who believes we are God's most precious resource.

Jesus makes it clear that even one lost person causes God great concern. That's one too many lost. And even one lost person found gives God great joy. That's hard for people to understand in our day and time. We live in a time when quantities are what matters. Large numbers talk and saving one doesn't seem worthwhile especially when we often see others as expendable.

We also have to remember that for every one that is helped, many more are still lost in hunger, lost in drugs, lost in the cycle of poverty that repeats itself over and over again, lost in violence, feuds and prejudices. Many are lost because they feel they have messed up so badly that they see little hope for changing and simply keep on giving in to their, self-destructive habits. How easy it is to give up! How many of us have done that or are doing that. There are times when we all get off center and wander from God because we don't feel we're worth anything.

But our God doesn't give up hope. God keeps on searching. The good news is that as much as we try to escape that offer of love and acceptance, as much as we insist on turning our backs on it, God will not rest until we "get it". God isn't going anywhere except after us. God isn't going to bother about anything else except sweeping the place high and dry until there is no place left for us to hide. It's just the way God is, that's all. Why Jesus was the way he was.

In Jesus God has come looking for us like a shepherd looking for a lost sheep or a woman looking for a lost coin and has given us grace more than we have deserved. And our question is not will God forgive me when I'm found? Rather it is, will I humbly accept the grace God offers me at this very moment to help me change?

God's grace seeks out what is most outcaste in our own soul. It's almost unbelievable. But that is who God is. Nothing we do can turn God away from us and wanting us back in the fold. And when we are found, God awaits with banquets and laughter and new life and cries, "Rejoice! What was lost is now found!" And that's the outrage of God's grace. Amen.