

Sundays after Pentecost - Year C [Proper 19]  
September 15, 2013  
Haven Lutheran Church  
Readings:; Psalm 51: 1-11; 1 Timothy 1: 12-17; Luke 15: 1-10

The phone rings and a little boy answers in a whisper: "Hello?"

The caller says: "Hi, is your Mommy there?"

"Yes!"

"Can I talk to her?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"She's busy."

"What about your Daddy, can I talk to him?"

"No! He's busy."

"Well, is there anyone else there?"

"My little sister."

"Is there anyone else there? Another adult?"

"Uh, huh. The police."

"Can I talk to one of them?" "No, they're busy."

"Is there anyone else there?" "Yes, the firemen."

"Can I talk to one of them?" "No, they're busy, too."

Caller: "Good heavens, your whole family is busy, the police and fire departments are there and they're busy! What's everybody doing?"

The little boy giggled and whispered: "They're looking for me." <sup>1</sup>

I'm not sure when the parents found *that* little boy that they would be doing much partying. Jesus tells us that our Lord is no less serious about finding the lost than those parents, police and firefighters. But who are the "lost" God is so very intent on finding?

Today we heard two of a trio of parables. Traditionally they are called "the lost sheep" and the "the lost coin". These two are followed by the parable of the "lost or prodigal son." Jesus is responding to the grumbling criticism of the religious leaders. Seeing Jesus associate with tax collectors and sinners, the Pharisees and scribes say, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Understand that eating with them" is not just about a quick bite at Panera. Sharing a meal, in that Middle Eastern culture, was viewed as a sign of camaraderie, acceptance and friendship of those around the table. So here is Jesus eating with the local ne'er-do-wells, the public, habitual moral disgraces: the tax collectors who are assumed to be Roman-collaborating cheats; prostitutes and thieves

spotted doing shady deals on the streets. The good church folks who try to live up to the law are concerned. Doesn't Jesus eating with such public disgraces give the appearance that he is welcoming, accepting, and befriending who they are and what they've done. What kind of an example is that for a man and teacher of God?<sup>2</sup>

So Jesus told them two parables. His critics want him to address the distinction between good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable. Jesus answers them with parables about things that are lost: A sheep who we assume has wandered and a coin, an inanimate object that can't of its own will hide or stray. They are not stories about righteous and sinners, they are stories about being lost and found. And being lost --- being separated from our Lord — can happen to any of us, those who could care less about God and others and those who are good people trying to live good, godly lives. Anyone can wander away from God — and we do. Anyone can find themselves unexpectedly in circumstances in which they cry out, "Where are you God?" What was the difference between those who were grumbling about Jesus' choice of dinner companions and the tax collectors and sinners who were coming near to listen to Jesus? Maybe the difference is that those good church folks didn't think they could get lost and the rejected & forsaken knew they were.

I wonder where we would put ourselves in this gospel? Honestly, aren't we more likely to consider ourselves among the righteous — those trying to do the right thing --- rather than those public, habitual sinners whose arrests or sleazy schemes are recorded in the newspaper? Of course there's nothing wrong with doing our best, working hard, coming to church — these are good things. Yet, it is possible to seem you have it all together... it's possible to have a great deal all together and still get lost, still disconnect from God at times.<sup>3</sup> Like those days, weeks, months when you are so busy you don't know if you're coming or going. You're so frazzled and intent on what needs

to get done that God is the last thing on your mind, except for a pat prayer asking help to survive. Isn't that lost? Or perhaps you're having problems with your spouse or child or work or your finances. You become so focused on the problems that you feel separated from God and those around you. Or maybe you have wandered away from God before you realize that you wouldn't ever think of letting your team or club down by not showing up but Sunday School, church and prayer have become increasingly optional. We can get lost in busyness, problems, shifting priorities — but being lost does not make us bad people. It simply makes us lost.... **and** much more likely to hear the good news Jesus tells us in these parables.

Jesus begins each of these parables with a question, "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, doesn't leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" He says it as if it would be the normal thing to do. Yet the average listener is thinking, "Who in their right mind risks a whole flock to go looking for one?" Jesus says, "What woman having ten silver coins if she loses one of them, doesn't light a lamp (which costs her money) to search night and day until she finds it?" Well maybe his audience finds that a bit more likely, until Jesus says that when she finds the coin she is so happy, the woman calls together her neighbors to celebrate ....The food and drink she likely provides costing as much or more than the coin she recovered. And then we're back to saying, "That's not ordinary! That's silly." Which is of course the point and the very good news. "These are not stories about how we act but rather about how God in Christ acts."<sup>4</sup> God not only loves us, but seeks, searches and reaches out for us — unwilling to give up until the lost are found.... and then having one heck of a celestial party to celebrate. We tend to get lost. Thank the Lord who is a persistent shepherd and woman who never tires of coming to find us.

Her parents told her to stay close to the campsite but she kept wandering to one

flower, one fascinating bug, one awesome paw print to another. Before long she was lost and night was falling. The more she tried to find her way, the most frightened and lost she became. Finally she cried herself to sleep. Her family and search party kept looking. Even when it was late and dark, her father kept going, kept calling her name. In the early morning light, he finally found her waking up in a clearing. She ran and jumped into his arms, shouting, "Daddy, Daddy. I found you, Daddy, I found you."

Throughout all of Scripture and history we find story after story of people looking for any way to get away from God or take over God's place or simply make choices that gradually lead away from God. Throughout that same Scripture and history it is God who is looking for a way to get to us and never stops. You see, when we're telling the story of us and God, we've got to talk about the God that came to us in Jesus Christ, the one that doesn't leave it all up to us. God is the one that seeks and searches and finds.<sup>5</sup> That is the good news Jesus was trying to tell the sinners and righteous alike back then and to us today. When we find we are lost, when we confide our hopes and fears, dreams and dashed hopes to God, we can be confident that God is already there. And when we turn toward God for any reason, God throws one heck of a party and invites all the angels to join in. So if you've wandered... if you are lost in problems or grief.... if you're hiding or wondering when God plans on showing up... you are in the right place, righteous or sinner. Here is where we hear God's word and eat the meal of life that helps us remember that even when we feel lost, God knows where we are. And like that persistent shepherd and woman, Jesus will keep coming to find us and bring us back, maybe singing a bit of motown to help us remember: "there ain't no mountain high enough; ain't no valley low enough, ain't no river wide enough to keep me from getting to you."

Linda M Alessandri 9/17/13

## ENDNOTES

1. ChristianGlobe Illustrations, Billy D. Strayhorn, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc.
2. Paraphrase from David Lose's notes on this gospel text, "Lost" posted September 9, 2013 on [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)
3. I am grateful to David Lose (article noted in footnote 2) for his insights on this gospel's focus on "lostness" rather than sinner vs. righteousness
4. William Willimon, "The Lengths That the Love of God Will Go" [Pulpit Resources](#) for July - September 2013 (Sept. 15, 2013)
5. Willimon, "The Lengths That the Love of God Will Go"