

16 Pentecost, Proper 19, Yr.  
September 11, 2016  
Exodus 21:1, 7-14; 1 Tim. 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

As you all know, Jane and I just got back from a cruise on the St. Lawrence River. It was a great trip all around, and one of the best things about it was meeting some really interesting people. One couple was from British Columbia and we had several good conversations. During one of those conversations, Bill asked me about St. Luke's. "Are there any hypocrites in your church?" was the question. My first response was a kind of theological one – "of course, we're all hypocrites" – thinking that none of us is fully living up to what we profess as Christians. But it turned out that he was asking a more down-to-earth question, i.e., is there anyone in your congregation who is, according to the dictionary definition of hypocrite, "presenting an appearance of virtuousness or falsely professing a belief to which one's own character and/or conduct does not conform." Or as one writer put it...to be a hypocrite is to talk of holiness and practice injustice. I thought for a moment and then replied that, in that existential sense, I could say no to his question – not that we aren't all falling short, but that I didn't think any of us was falsely professing some kind of holiness, unaware of our shortcomings, unaware that we aren't "there" yet, unaware that we need God's mercy, forgiveness and grace.

The readings this morning are all about that kind of unawareness, all about people who are lost, all about the ways in which we can be lost. Chapter 15, from which we read this morning, is sometimes considered to be the very heart of Luke's Gospel because it paints a distinctive picture of God. We heard two parables, the lost sheep and the lost coin, but actually, the chapter has 3 parables about being lost, because these two are followed directly by the story of the lost child, the Prodigal Son. The theme is, of course, God's love and mercy for sinful human beings and God's perseverance in finding us and bringing us home.

There are lost souls all over the place in these readings and they give us plenty of examples about how we manage to get ourselves lost. In the Exodus reading, the Israelites are lost in their anxiety and confusion and perhaps even in their ignorance about what's going on in

their trek through the desert and they decide that the god they currently have just isn't cutting it – they want a different one. Aaron is also lost, but for a different reason. He gets lost because he forgets what he's about. He forgets that he's supposed to be leading the people toward God, not just giving them what they want to keep them happy. And then in the Timothy reading, Paul tells about when he was lost, when he thought it was all about persecuting Christians. In his case, he says he acted out of ignorance in his unbelief and so received mercy. A note, by the way, that a person can be sincere and still be wrong!

In the Gospel, we see the scribes and Pharisees grumbling about the fact that Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners. Here we see the perfect example of people who are lost – only they're lost in their righteousness, which is just another definition for hypocrite. And they're upset because Jesus eating with sinners. We've talked about the centrality of eating in that culture and the fact that to eat together was to be bound together. Think of the word companion which comes from the Latin, “com” (with”) and “panis” (bread) – to eat together was to become a companion. And it's in response to their complaining that Jesus tells these three stories about being lost – the sheep, the coin and the son.

Of course, the obvious lesson of the parables is that God is faithful and will persevere – that God searches for us and is relentless in that search.

But the larger question is, I think, what does it mean to be lost and who exactly is lost here? I'm thinking back to Genesis – the first words God speaks to Adam after the fall are WHERE ARE YOU? Is there something about being human that entails being susceptible to being lost? Henri Nouwen says that the crisis of spirituality in our time is that most of us have addresses but none of us can be found there.

The scribes and Pharisees (and they stand for all anyone who's falsely confident in their own self-righteousness) know exactly who the lost folks are – it's those sinners over there. And they were supported in their opinion by the society in which they lived. The orthodox labeled those who didn't keep the law as “people of the land” and there was a complete barrier between

the two groups. People of the land couldn't be trusted with money, they weren't allowed to give testimony in legal proceedings, they couldn't be guardians of orphans, or custodians of charitable funds, or even companions on a journey. They had been written off. Everyone was clear about who stood where. Those sinners were lost and good riddance. So Jesus' concern for and presence with these people is puzzling at best. But then, Jesus goes further and says that there will be rejoicing in heaven over a sinner who repents. Some interpreters of Hebrew law said exactly the opposite – there would be rejoicing in heaven over every sinner who was obliterated. The Scribes and Pharisees thought their judgments were standing on some pretty solid ground and they resent Jesus turning it all upside down.

If you look at the parables and the other readings, we can see that there are many ways to get lost. Apparently, sheep can get lost because they just “nibble” their way from one tuft of grass to another until they're outside the fence and can't figure out how to get back. Can't we do the same? Not really understanding the whole picture, just keeping our heads down and involved with day-to-day stuff. It's a kind of wandering off. And I think it's safe to say that the Father's response to this kind of ignorant or accidental lostness is to come actively searching.

But in the story of the prodigal son, the boy gets lost more willfully, you'll recall. He's had it at home and he wants his share of the inheritance so he can be long gone. And you'll note here that in that kind of willful lostness, the Father doesn't come searching; instead there's a need for the son to wake up to his condition and turn toward home. He has to admit he's lost. How many jokes are there about husbands and wives driving somewhere and getting lost because the husband refuses to ask for directions? There's a story about husband and wife driving; they were lost. The wife suggested they ask directions from a fellow on the corner. The husband replied that, if he were asked, he'd never admit he didn't know and he was convinced that was true of all men – so that fellow probably doesn't know and won't admit it, so any directions he gave us would be useless.

And that's a good illustration of our human condition. We hate to admit our need and our vulnerability. Add to that the fact that our society imbues us with a sense of competition and it all means that it's really difficult for us to look at ourselves with honesty and others with love and compassion. That's part of what's going on here. The Pharisees have a system figured out. They know who's in and who's out. They're in, thank God, and that's the end of the matter. Their anger at Jesus certainly has to do with him upsetting their certainties and questioning their society's traditions. In fact, one commentator has said that maybe the reason Jesus was doing all that eating and drinking with sinners was because he was no longer acceptable in polite company. And now Jesus is taking away their privileged position; in fact, it could be argued that he's even giving preference to sinners. Letting sinners get ahead of the good folks. There's a Hebrew story that illustrates the point here:

One day the Lord appeared to a hardworking farmer and granted him three wishes, but with the condition that whatever the farmer was granted it would be doubled for his neighbor. The farmer was elated at this turn of events and immediately wished for a hundred cattle. Instantly he received the cattle and was overjoyed until he saw his neighbor had 200. Then he wished for a hundred acres of land. When it was received he was again overjoyed until he realized his neighbor had received 200. The farmer could not celebrate God's goodness, but rather kept feeling jealous and slighted because his neighbor had received more. Finally he stated his third wish; that God would strike him blind in one eye. And, the story says, God wept.

And isn't this the position of the Elder Son in the story of the Prodigal? All three of these parables end with great rejoicing and wonderful parties. The question for the Elder Son and for the Pharisees, and for us, is whether we can recognize that we too have been lost and are found, we too have received grace that was never earned or deserved. The question for them, and us, is whether we open our eyes and then open our hands to accept this free gift of grace – the question for us and for them is whether we will delight in the rejoicing or oppose it.

One more thought about being lost. Joy and Len gave me a portable GPS, which Jane and I used (more or less) on the trip. I've read more than one story recently about people who followed their GPS so blindly that they did things like driving into the lake. They were lost and didn't know it. But I hadn't been here in Door County very long before someone told me that you can't get irrevocably lost here. You'll come to water or Sturgeon Bay. I think that's the message in these parables – you'd have to work really hard to be irrevocably lost, to keep away from the party. The invitation is always there. Come on in and rejoice with all those who, like you, were lost and have been found. Amen.