

14 Pentecost, Proper 19, Yr. C

September 15, 2019

Exodus 32:7-14, 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

All three of the readings this morning deal, in one way or another, with being lost and then being found. In Exodus, it's the Israelites and Aaron; in Timothy it's Paul, in Luke, it's the sheep and the coin. Being lost. I'm thinking that, by definition, you have to have a goal, a destination that you're heading towards, and then going somewhere else before you can be said to be lost. I remember a friend telling me a story. She and a friend of hers were heading toward Eau Claire, missed a turn somewhere and then discovered they were in Minocqua. They knew then that they were lost.

In Exodus, the Israelites have been given the law, they have just promised that they will be God's people and obey God's commandments – which included not worshipping idols. They had promised that God would be their God and they would be God's people. But then, they got lost. Moses had gone up the mountain to talk with God and he'd been gone a long time. In the absence of his leadership, they were floundering. They were physically lost, actually, out in the middle of the desert somewhere. They were psychologically lost without their leader and they were, it turns out, religiously lost. Surrounded as they were by cultures with many gods and images to worship, in their "lostness" they forgot what they had promised and built a god that they could see and touch. With the promises they had made and the relationship with God that had been established, they had a goal, a destination. They were to work with God, to be his people, to create a society where God's vision would reign. It would be a society, a community, characterized by love, justice and compassion, where the marginalized were included, where strangers would be welcomed, where the weak and dispossessed were cared for. But what happened? They forgot? They were afraid? They were confused? We come in as Moses comes back down the mountain having been forewarned by God about the golden calf. Idol worship. We know that it simply means putting something in God's place, putting some created thing first in our lives. For us today, it's probably more about money, or security or control. But I just read an article about two Methodist pastors in Charlottesville, VA, who teamed up

to do outside Bible classes around Confederate statues, arguing that, according to the Bible, those statutes have become idols and that the South's "lost cause" or its fear of losing its distinctive culture have displaced God. Many of us watched the movie *The Help* last Sunday evening. In the discussions that followed, while I don't believe anyone used the word IDOL that was surely one of the points the movie was making. That there were any number of things that took first place in the lives of the white community: status, power, control, belonging. And it wasn't just blacks who were excluded; those considered white trash were as well.

So, while in the Hebrew Scriptures, the goal is that egalitarian community, it's really the same in the New Testament. Here it's what Jesus calls the Kingdom. And, like the Israelites, to the extent that we put something else in the place of God as our first priority, we too can end up worshipping idols. And to the extent we're not living towards the kingdom, we're lost. Perhaps the word is 'sinners.' That's certainly the word that Paul uses when he describes his earlier life. And that's part of the conversation in the Luke reading this morning. Luke tells us that tax collectors and sinners were coming near to hear Jesus. I know I've said before that tax collectors squeezed the Jews for the benefit of the Romans and for whatever extra they could get for themselves. And sinners? That could mean those who didn't observe all the ritual law, or it could mean those who were living notoriously open sinful lives. And the scribes and Pharisees, are watching this and saying something like, "Ugh, there goes the neighborhood." We tend to think of them as the bad guys, but they weren't, not really. They were trying, as best they could, to live the way they thought God wanted: so worship and prayer, honoring the Scripture, trying to live generously and dutifully. But I wonder if their idea of God was of a Being that was a harsh taskmaster, one with a clipboard for keeping track. As someone has pointed out, what they lacked was joy.

So, when they see Jesus eating and drinking with what they thought were undesirable people, undoubtedly enjoying their company, they were seriously offended. So Jesus tells them three parables, two of which we have in this morning's reading. They are sometimes called the "party parables" because they all involve finding something that was lost and

then rejoicing – throwing a party to celebrate. He tells them about the lost sheep and the shepherd who leaves the 99 to find the 1. Wouldn't you do that? he asks. Well, if you think about it, the answer is probably no. It surely is not the prudent thing to do. And as for the woman and the coin, some commentators point out that she wasn't prudent either – she spent more on lamp oil and on the party for her friends and neighbors than the coin was worth. And the third parable, the one we all know as the story of prodigal son, that's not about prudence either – who knows if the son will stay and buckle down and live in a way that honors his father? Prudence would have required the father to at least wait a bit before giving him that ring and that robe and those sandals, to say nothing of throwing a party. None of these parables is about prudence, but each is a comment on God – on God's never failing grace, on God's refusal to give up on us, on God's abundant and profligate love.

There's something else here that I think we should look at. Jesus says that there's more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance. Robert Capon, in commenting on this parable, says that there is probably no one in that need-no-repentance category. As Paul reminds us elsewhere, all have sinned. The problem, for the Pharisees and for the Pharisee in each of us, as well as for the elder brother, whose resentment at the forgiveness and grace being extended to his younger brother keeps him outside and away from the party, that problem is the failure to recognize their own "lostness," their own failures and sin, their own need of grace.

Some of you may have read the short story by Flannery O'Connor, titled "Revelation." In that story, a white Southern woman, Ruby Turpin, is in a doctor's waiting room. There are others there, too. People that Ruby characterizes as white trash. Ruby sometimes wonders who she would have chosen to be, if Jesus had given her a choice. She's horrified to think that the only other choices might have been to be black or white trash. And she's gratified that she's in just the right place, at the top of the heap, in the social order that God himself has ordained. Finding herself in this undesirable company, she tried to be pleasant, chattering on condescendingly. At one point, Ruby muses out loud, "If it's one thing I am,

it's grateful. When I think of all I could have been besides myself...I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!'" The next thing she knows, she's hit by a book that the girl across from her has thrown at her – when the girl is taken away, she whispers to Ruby, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog." (And just so the reader doesn't miss the point that this message is a gift, O'Connor tells us the girl's name is Mary Grace.) Ruby and all her certainties are turned inside out by this encounter. Later that day, she has a vision; she sees a vast bridge stretching from earth up to heaven, with a horde of souls rumbling toward heaven. Ruby was amazed to see whole companies of white trash and bands of blacks – all shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs and all going ahead. And, bringing up the rear of the procession were people she recognized – people who like herself and her husband, had 'always had a little of everything...they were marching with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior....' Ruby was given a chance to rethink what God's ordained order really is; but Luke would point to this story and say, "See? Everybody's in the line.

So, in the end, Jesus is showing us the face of God. A God who loves without reserve, a God who will never give up until each of us is safely home. A God who rejoices and throws a party when each one arrives. Amen.