

**Pentecost 14 C**

Exodus 32:7-14

Psalms 51:1-10

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

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Loss hurts. When bad things happen in life, it hurts. When our loved ones die, we feel lost and alone.

And I want to get right to the point from our Gospel reading this morning, to clarify that Jesus isn't talking about sheep and coins. He's speaking about our relationships with one another and with God.

We all know being "lost" can happen in infinite ways. Sometimes it is profound, like for those in the video. So, just who are the lost in this story? We heard that under the watchful eye of the religious establishment Jesus spoke with "tax collectors and sinners" (I always find it quite funny that "tax collectors" get a category all to themselves!) In the eyes of everyone who was watching and listening these lowlifes of society were the ones that no one wanted to associate with. (You can tell; as soon as someone is given a label like that you're going to want to keep your distance.) The upstanding citizens of this story are shocked to see Jesus going far beyond just being nice, but saying, "*Did you see? He actually sits down with them!*" Shocking.

In a time when people thought that such sinfulness was, in a way, contagious, it was beyond imagination that one would willingly be in such close proximity. Think about your family dinner table. We eat together there with those who are closest to us or with guests, but they are of our choosing. Eating together signifies a very close and deep, perhaps even intimate, relationship. Few of us would dine with "tax collectors and sinners," or whatever "sinful" type person that might equate to today. What led them to be categorized in this type of sinfulness we'll never know.

The tax collectors and sinners come to Jesus fully aware of their downfalls, fully aware of their need for forgiveness, fully aware of their desire to lead a different life. They come so that whatever they could not accomplish on their own, could be accomplished with Christ. When all else failed them, even themselves, they come to Jesus. Yet, these are not the only ones who are lost. There are also those who have no need of Jesus, because they have determined their own self-righteousness; they stand on the sidelines and scoff, unwilling to enter into a life changing relationship, unwilling to imagine that they need to do anything different. They are the ones who

are determined to look after themselves; God might be handy for a dinner time prayer, but not for the really important stuff.

And so yes, there are many ways to be lost. At our Thursday morning Bible study we talked about this. For some it is the reality of terrible things that they have done and cannot let go of; the weight of shame is heavy and holds them back from life. For some it is the deep sadness of losing loved ones, losing those relationships and becoming lost in the web of grief. For some it is isolation and loneliness, a feeling of worthlessness, that becomes part of their self-described identity. For some it is carrying the silent pain of family struggles, abuse, incarceration, addiction, debt, infidelity and so much more that happens behind closed doors. For some it is inflated egos that become a wall. For some it is the love of material things. Of course we could go on.

But we also hear in today's story that there is hope. We have great hope in Christ who is the shepherd, who is the woman who will not give up searching. Jesus knows just how hard this is to believe that we are worthy to be loved. When we're in the midst of darkness, of despair, we can't imagine anything different. A lost sheep doesn't decide it's time to go back to the flock after a night in the woods, if it knew its way back it wasn't lost in the first place. Nor does a lost coin that rolled under the dresser pick itself up. Being lost is serious. So serious that God has decided that nothing can stop them from searching. And as I said earlier, we not really talking about livestock and money, but of people. Using everyday objects of value Jesus will build on this lesson in the next story of the Prodigal Son. There he ups the ante from sheep and coins to a parent's beloved children.

There is always hope. We can never be so lost that we are unfindable. And this is the truly unbelievable message of the gospel, it is the stumbling block to which we constantly ask, "*yeah but what if I did this?*" or "*what if somebody did that to me?*" It's as if we are always looking for that final line in the sand, as if we are always needing to know just how far can we push things before we are unloved. But with God there is no line we can cross. Even Paul, who writes to us in the letter of first Timothy, describes how he was lost, how he felt he had crossed the final line with God. Paul describes himself as the worst person of all and yet God found him. The book of Exodus describes an entire community lost in the wilderness, so lost that they even decided they would make their own god. And yet God restored them.

Even when the end of life comes, and we are unsure of what will happen next, we are assured that God's love doesn't end.

In the church we call this grace. We are not loved because we deserve it or because we earned it or because we're good enough for it, but only because it is a gift to us. And if it is a gift to us then it is a gift to others. And so every time we are tempted to stand on the sidelines and scoff at those whom have been labeled, the Spirit asks us to remember that all are beloved.

Together, we are God's holy and beloved family. Together we are found and held safe. Together we always have hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.