

Homily
Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 11th, 2022

The Reverend Victoria Scott

Church of the Ascension, Ottawa

[Readings: JEREMIAH 4:11-12, 22-28; PSALM 14; 1 TIMOTHY 1:12-17; LUKE 15:1-10](#)

I used to exercise at the gym at Carleton University. On the way into the gym there was the biggest “Lost and Found” bin I’ve ever seen, and it was overflowing. T-shirts, sweatshirts, shorts and shoes spilling all over the place, water bottles tangled up in the mix.

Every time I walked by, I would think “How can so much be lost?” and I would wonder “How have so many people not realized that they’ve lost these things?” I wondered “Will these things ever be found?”

Well, they won’t be found if no one notices that they are lost. If no one goes looking for them...

Two weeks ago, I shared Walter Brueggeman’s assertion that we take on the character of the God we follow. This morning’s well-known parables show us that character. We might be tempted to take a deep dive into identifying ourselves in these two parables. Are we the sheep? The shepherd? Are we among the ninety-nine who need no repentance? But these stories are about God. Jesus tells these stories to show us what God is like. God always notices, and God is always looking to find what is lost, whether it’s a sheep, a coin, or us. God is always – eternally, relentlessly – digging around in the great “Lost and Found” bin of life!

Just as the shepherd worked tirelessly to bring the one sheep back to the fold with the ninety-nine, just as the woman turned her house upside down to find the one coin, God is always searching. God is always seeking to re-establish connection where there is disconnection, whether that disconnection – that “lostness” – is between us and God, or between us and each other and our world. And God rejoices in the finding. God rejoices in connection!

Earlier this year Sam Wells gave a lecture as part of the Diocesan anniversary celebrations. It was called “Re-Imagining the Church”, but he began with some rather lofty questions about the purpose of the universe. His compelling argument is that the whole purpose of the universe is *relationship*. He talked about the universe being made up of essence – that which is eternal – and existence, which will come to an end. Essence chose to be in relationship with existence. This was and is the whole point. Essence – God – chose, wanted, wants, to be in relationship with existence: with us! The Incarnation – Jesus – is essence coming to be in relationship with us. Jesus’s earthly life and ministry shows us how to be in relationship with essence to infuse our existence with meaning. Jesus’s death and Resurrection is essence choosing to remain in relationship with existence, and Jesus’s Ascension is essence drawing existence into an eternal relationship, forever.

God is always choosing to be in relationship with us. Sometimes that means coming looking for us when we are lost – when we have wandered off like the sheep and become disconnected, or when our actions leave us lost like a coin in a dark corner.

Jesus came to show us what relationship looks like. Relationship – meaningful connection – is not a formula. It’s not about ticking boxes and being finished with loss and being lost. There will always be a “Lost and Found” bin at the Carleton gym. And this is not a cause for despair, but rather a reminder that life is a continuum of losing and finding.

God is always looking for us when we are lost, and rejoicing when we are found and relationship is restored. May we find deep comfort and reassurance in this. And, may that comfort and reassurance help us to step into that continuum of losing and finding in this life...

Diana Butler Bass writes about religion, looking to the Latin *religare* meaning “to bind” or reconnect, meaning that religion is about mending what has been broken, recovering what has been mislaid, and reconnecting that which is frayed. Relationship is at the heart of this understanding of religion. Committing ourselves to an ongoing process of mending, recovering what has been mislaid, and reconnecting that which is frayed acknowledges that life is a continuum of losing and finding, of being lost and being found.

There is another definition of religion though: an obligation to a particular order of things (like doctrine, polity, or moral action – a “bounden duty”). This was the Pharisees’ definition of religion – their understanding of holiness. And then Jesus came along and ate with tax collectors and sinners, upsetting the order, turning everything they knew about righteousness and salvation on its head. No wonder they were grumbling! In turning that order upside down Jesus was saying “choose connection”. Jesus was pointing those who walked with him, and he is pointing us to a binding, mending, and reconnecting understanding of religion. He was pointing toward relationship.

The harsh words in our reading from Jeremiah can be heard as a description of a people who have grown deaf to God’s invitation into relationship. Our Psalm is about a loss of connection. And our reading from 1 Timothy has losing and finding all through it with Paul’s words about the overflowing of God’s grace: God seeking, relentlessly, even in the face of ignorance and unbelief until connection and relationship with Paul is restored. This lets us know that nothing we can do will stop God from seeking and finding us!

Lost and found. There is tremendous poignancy in these words after two and a half years of pandemic. Loss – lost loved ones, lost time, lost health, loss of a sense of connection and belonging, loss of community, loss of trust, loss of a feeling of safety, loss of a feeling of God’s presence with us – loss is woven right through these last years.

The pandemic has shown us that the particular order of things can be overturned and upset by the most unanticipated of things. Diana Butler Bass says this about the work of the church after these pandemic years:

“...the task of the post-pandemic church – the work of finding, repairing, and relocating – is clear. We must reconnect ourselves and others with time, history, physicality, and relationships. In this sense, the future of religion has never been brighter – our lost world needs finding. Pandemic dislocation calls for guides and weavers of wisdom. We don’t need to return to the old ways, we need to be relocated. We need to find a new place, a new home in a disrupted world.”

She goes on to say:

“And at the very heart of finding our lost selves is relocating our hearts in and with God.”

I give thanks for this community of Ascension. I give thanks for the opportunity we have on a Sunday morning to relocate our hearts in and with God through Anglican ritual, tradition and Sacraments. I give thanks for the binding, mending and reconnecting that are possible through loving and caring relationships in this place. May we be reminded this morning, that God is always looking for us when we are lost, and rejoicing when we are found and relationship is restored. May we find deep comfort and reassurance in this. And, may that comfort and reassurance help us to step into that continuum of losing and finding in this life, today, and every day. In Jesus name. Amen.

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