



Today is our *National Day of Service and Remembrance*, also known as *Patriot Day*. It is a reminder to us that we will never forget what we have lost while moving forward through service to others. This is not a “either/or” day or mindset. Rather, it is a “both/and” day and mindset.

In the past, today’s Gospel reading usually has us consider the shepherd and the woman as representing God. A God who will seek after what has been lost. The image is of a God who is relentless and keeps searching until the lost –

that is, us - is found. Once found and restored to God, the celebration begins. One wonders if the sheep that was lost became the sacrifice, providing the meat for the meal. Or the woman using the coin that was lost to pay for the food at the party. Maybe I don’t want to be compared to the lost sheep or the lost coin if it means that I become the payment for the party! Lost – found – sacrifice. Hmmm.

Amy-Jill Levine, professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt and an observant Jew who can help us read the parables of Jesus in ways congruent with Jewish understanding, suggests that neither the sheep nor the coin can repent.¹ The coin cannot sin. And depending upon your understanding of animal cognition and reason, a sheep cannot sin, either – neither coin nor sheep have the ability to tell right from wrong. And who among us is righteous enough that we need no repentance? What is Jesus after in these two brief stories of lost and found if we are willing to look behind what has become the commonplace reading of these parables? This is not to say that those understandings of the parables are wrong. Rather, that parables may be multi-valent and so more than one understanding of what Jesus was saying is possible and even probable.

Wisdom tells us that if we are lost in the woods, at the airport parking lot and can’t find our car, or otherwise lost in a strange place, that we should stay still. We should calm our normal anxiety; think back to how we got to where we are, and only then take steps to move when we are very, very certain that we know the way out.² In most cases, this means staying still right where we are and waiting for help. There are numerous cases of hikers being lost and never found because they stepped off the path where they had told their compatriots they were traveling, got into trouble, and died. The searchers went right past where they were because the hiker had stepped off the path. They were lost but not found. There was no celebration at their return. Something we can learn from being lost and staying still is getting to know the place where we are in ways that escape us when we simply move through a situation without reflection. Being lost is not always a bad thing when it leads to deeper self-knowledge and a deeper understanding of how we are in relationship with God. Contemplative prayer asks us to stop and be still. To consider what we can learn of God and about our relationship with God when we stop and are still.

¹ Amy-Jill Levine. *Short Stories by Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014).

² Thanks to Rev. Darla Goodrich, First Christian Church, for reminding us that part of being lost is being still until the unknown becomes known.

Levine asks us to consider how we understand the parables if we are the shepherd who loses the sheep? What if we are the woman who loses the coin? We have been entrusted with a flock of sheep or a group of coins: things that have value. While it is not stated, I think there is an implication of the sheep and the coins being lost through negligence; perhaps through distraction or perhaps through not paying attention to what God has gifted us with. We have lost what is necessary to make our lives whole. And, at least at the time of the parables, there was no app to find your lost phone. We might say the Bible, our tradition and our reason and experience are our current day apps that can help us find our way back to Jesus. Back to a life that is full and complete. A life that celebrates the persistence of God in seeking us out. A life that celebrates when we come to our senses and return to the values that Jesus has set before us. We have what we need, in and through our trust in God, to find what in ourselves has become lost. We have what we need, in our faith to live in ways that give glory to God.

Several years back, All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten³, paraphrased what Jesus calls us to do and how to live. Be kind to strangers. Play fairly. Share everything. Don't hit others. And, among the short, pithy, sentences is this one:

“... dreams are more powerful than facts. ... hope always triumphs over experience. ... laughter is the only cure for grief. And I believe that love is stronger than death.”

As we remember the events of September 11, 2001 today, our dreams, hope, laughter and love help us go on. Not forgetting but remembering those who gave of themselves, even to their own death, that others might live. I imagine that not all of the first responders or those who helped were Christians who believed in the resurrection: that death is not the end but rather a new beginning. Regardless, it is my belief that all who helped that day were living their values that we search out the lost until they are found. We give of ourselves that others might live. We offer a helping hand and a listening ear to those who are struggling with life's challenges.

When Paul wrote to Timothy, who he calls his loyal child in the faith, he started by reminding Timothy that we are given grace, mercy and peace from God (1 Tim. 1:2). Paul reminds Timothy that it is Christ Jesus who has strengthened Paul and made him a messenger of the Gospel, even though Paul had previously been a blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of violence. The grace of God had so infused Paul that Paul was able to put his past behind him, change his goals and become a beacon to others of what is possible through the love of God and the mercy granted to sinners. Paul was lost and then was found. And the redemption following repentance is cause for celebration.

Each time we sing *Amazing Grace* we are reminded of these parables and of Paul's encouragement to Timothy:

Amazing grace how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now I'm found.
Was blind but now I see.

³ Robert Fulghum. All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten (New York: Ballantine Books, 204)

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.

God's grace is poured out on us. It is not something we earned or that we can ever earn. It simply is given to us out of God's great love for us. Whether you like the understanding of these parables that God is the seeker after us or consider that we are the ones who have lost what is critical to a whole life and thus we are the seekers, remember that God loves us and our life and our world is not complete until we find that which is necessary: God's love. And when we acknowledge our dependence upon God, and that it is God's mercy and grace which enables us to turn towards God, the source of all that we are and all that we have, it is cause for celebration. Alleluia. Amen.