

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Exodus 32:7-14; Luke 15: 1-10

Nanette Pitt

September 15, 2013

In the spirit of your getting to know me a bit better this morning, I thought I'd begin by giving you an insight into my home life with Steven.

Steven will, every now and then, call out to me when he's preparing dinner or wanting a snack or where is such and such?

Now the first problem with this situation is that, when he does this his head is usually buried in the fridge or a kitchen cupboard and I'm usually on the other end of the house absorbed in something so the question usually sounds more like [mumbling sounds]! And it takes a few back and forths to register.

The second problem with this situation is that I usually know full well that whatever it is that Steven is looking for is definitely there but there's no convincing him until I've gone all the way over and pointed it out.

I find this very frustrating and, of course, the roles are never reversed (or rather, since Steven isn't in worship with us this morning or you get to hear my version first!).

Please would you pray with me?

Sweet Spirit, bless us now in our listening and speaking that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts might be water and sunlight to the truth planted within each of our souls. Amen.

There is a beautiful dance to do between this morning's Scriptures choreographed by the editors of the Common Lectionary. So I invite you to waltz with me into the Word of God!

The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'"

It's easy to assume that sinners in the Bible, people who are acting perversely, are evil, willful wrongdoers ignoring the way of God and abandoning good. But there's way more nuance here! The tribe of Israel wants to know God, they yearn for God with all their hearts, and they want to praise and thank God for redeeming them, for bringing them up out of the land of Egypt and freeing them from generations of slavery.

They want to find, to know God so they cast an idol of gold.

I think there are likely a fair number of us in the room today who are searching, searching for peace, wholeness, truth, and ultimately, searching for God.

And truth be told, it's often as difficult for us as it seems to have been for the Hebrew peoples. It's not easy to discern the will of God, to hear what some call the voice of God. It's sometimes so much easier when someone else — a preacher or a prophet — tells us what that is.

When it's just us, by ourselves, it seems it's easy to feel isolated and to be unsure. It's easy to get lost.

Jesus gives us two beautiful parables about something lost and found in the Gospel of Luke: the lost sheep and the lost coin.

The structure of the two stories is identical, they share the same themes, and the moral is alike. So why two parables? Jesus' context matters here, remember the opening verses?

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable:

So there are two groups, the Pharisees and scribes and the tax collectors and sinners who, in the Pharisees and scribes eyes, broke moral law and were ritually unclean. The parables challenge the listeners (then and now) not only to join God in celebrating but to join in God's mercy. And here's the outrageous bit — Jesus responds to the criticism that he is welcoming of the tax collectors and sinners by likening God to not one but two shocking characters: a shepherd, who commentators tell us had developed at that time, a bad reputation as "shiftless, thieving, trespassing hirelings." And then as a poor woman who searches for something of little value.

So not only are these parables an insight into who Jesus aligns God with but they tell us something about what it means to be lost in God's eyes.

It seems obvious once named but may easily escape our notice — the NIB notes "what was lost belonged to the owner from the start."

It's an important departure point — to recognize that we are already God's, no matter where, no matter what we already belong.

It's a bit like your car keys — they go with your car — if you have the car, you got it with a set of keys. And yet those keys can be elusive!

I mean, you know they're there — somewhere — you just came in — you know you put them down — someplace.

That got me thinking about exactly what it means to be lost or to lose something.

The woman knows that the coin is there somewhere and she and the shepherd expend great energy searching. So we can trust they're searching with the certain expectation of finding what is lost.

The analogy of God as Shepherd and woman only goes so far ó I mean can God really lose something? Remember last week's sermon when Geordie pointed out that God's question "where are you?" in the Garden of Eden wasn't a question of their physical position. God knows where each aspect of creation is at any given time. The question is, instead, existential.

It's a little like Dawne and Jimmy Quinn's dog who knows it's not allowed up on the couch so, when caught in the act, she puts her front legs down off the couch and her head under the coffee table. If I can't see you, you can't see me and, if I don't know you're there, then you aren't!

So the coin and the sheep ó they aren't really lost ó we know they're there, it's just a matter of where!

Just like your car keys, the lost item is right there in the same space and yet it's just escaping you.

Someone's grandmother used to say, "If it was a snake, it would've bitten you!"

And just like my Steven peering into the fridge and searching, it's all about perception rather than position.

You know that what you're looking for is there, hiding in plain sight. These parables challenge us to think about the way we look and the way we want to see and be seen.

We are always right there with God, we already belong to God but being in relationship with the Divine is not as simple as making a golden calf ó easy to see and right here in front of us ó it's about taking the journey into the questioning life of faith that feels a little like losing your car keys ó trusting in the mercy and goodness of a mysterious God who never stops searching for us.

And finally, each parable ends with the moral in verses 7 ó

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

And in verse 15 ó

Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

In Luke, the Greek word for repent is ὁμετανοιαῖα meaning to ὁchange one's mind upon reflection, to repent.ῖ In Hebrew it's ὁteshuvahῖ and the root verb in that word ὁshuvῖ means to literally ὁto turn.ῖ

Sometimes I think we have the idea that when we feel we are lost we are where God is not. We feel abandoned and alone. We think that to find God we must be someone completely different, be in a completely different place ὁ perhaps our concept of what a ὁChristianῖ is ὁ but the Good News on this day is that we're hiding in plain sight!

God is right there with us, has been all along. To be found by God is a lot like searching for our car keys ὁ it's only to change our perception, to turn and see ὁAh, here it's been all along!ῖ

Please note that my sermons are written to facilitate the spoken word. All aspects, including grammar and punctuation, are styled to assist my delivery and are not necessarily correct.
--

© 2013 Nanette Pitt.

First Church of Christ Congregational
12 South Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut 06107
860.233.9605 www.whfirstchurch.org