

Luke 15: 1-10 "Lost in the Rubble" Rev. Janet Chapman 9/11/22

Song: "The Prayer" from hit Broadway Musical "Come From Away" based on the remarkable true story of 38 planes filled with passengers forced to land in Gander, Newfoundland during the initial hours after the 9/11 crisis. The musical is unexpectedly joyous, uplifting and filled with humor. In one of the few somber and reflective portions of the musical, about half way through, one of the characters named Kevin recalls a song he heard as a child that seems to speak to him and others, "The Prayer" (of St. Francis.)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYBTCHm48Ps&ab_channel=ChadKimball-Topic

"Come From Away" is one of the musicals I saw on Broadway which is getting standing ovations every night, not because its New York City, but because after 21 years, we are still seeking to understand our lives in the shadow of 9/11. We are still trying to find what was lost in the rubble, still trying to make sense of the senseless. It is a journey not limited to 9/11 but coincides with every circumstance where our lives were turned into rubble, been burnt to the ground, had the rug yanked out from under us, and we had to pick ourselves up and begin the recovery. In doing so, we discover by God's grace how to smile at our human frailties, how to chuckle at our limited vision, which thankfully hasn't been the death of us yet.

As we are surrounded with relevant images to the life of St. Francis, it occurs to me that his story gives us a whole new perspective on life after 9/11. In walking through Assisi a couple months ago, I was struck by the light-hearted spirit which pervaded the village. Visitors and locals alike meandered, greeted each other with a warm ciao, and stopped to acknowledge the many two-legged and four-legged creatures which graced the cobblestone streets. Apart from the bird-whacking merchant selling St. Francis statues which I shared about a few weeks ago, it

was apparent that there was a different spirit prevalent in Assisi. Perhaps it was the visible presence of two monastic communities following in Francis' path, or maybe it was the awareness that Francis himself exuded a light-hearted spirit despite the troubles of the day. I think Francis saw something in scripture we often miss and that is our God enjoys a good laugh. As Frederick Buechner shared, God is that comic shepherd who gets a greater kick out of finding that one lost sheep than out of the 99 who had the good sense not to get lost in the first place. God is that eccentric host who, when the country-club crowd has better things to do than come live it up at God's feast, God goes out into the barrio, the slums, soup kitchens and charity wards and brings back what some would call a freak show. We've even seen God's humor coming out with regards to 9/11 – there are some silly people across our nation who have renamed today "Random Acts of Kindness Day." They make it their mission on this day of loss to do good for others, to spread smiles wherever they go. What kind of silliness is that – Francis would say that is God's kind of silliness. God is like the person with no legs who sells shoelaces at the corner. God is the village idiot standing at the stop light waving his hand as cars go by yelling "You are loved." God is the woman who lost one singular coin out of ten, and spends hours and hours searching for it. She sweeps up every bit of dust, she turns over every last piece of rubble, she invests far more time searching for that one coin than its worth. Her neighbors laugh at her foolishness, at her wasted time that could have been spent earning 100x the value of that coin elsewhere. And when the lost is found, the Divine Comedian says "Rejoice with me, let's throw a party, for that which was lost has been found!"

Yes, too often we misread and misunderstand scripture. In our two parables from Luke's Gospel, folks often confuse who or what the lost items represent. For a long time, even I

thought the lost lamb and lost coin represented “sinners” out there, out beyond the fold, beyond the country I call Christianity, beyond the purview of God, the Church, and me. But Debie Thomas correctly responds, “No, the lost lamb belongs to the shepherd’s flock from the very beginning of the story – it is his lamb. Likewise, the coin in the second parable belongs to the woman before she loses it; the coin is one of her very own. In other words, these parables are not about lost outsiders finding salvation and becoming Christians. They are about us, the Bible readers, the church-goers, the bread-and-wine consumers. The stories are about lostness on the inside. We can lose our sense of belonging, our capacity to trust, our willingness to persevere in the rubble of circumstances. Some of us get lost when prayer turns to dust in our mouths, when once beloved scriptures make our skin crawl, when the table that once nourished us now leaves us cranky, confused, or bored. We get lost, we get so miserably lost that the shepherd has to wander thru the rocky wilderness to find us. We get so wholly lost that the keeper of the house has to light a lamp, pick up a broom, and sweep out every nook and cranny to discover what’s become of us.

My first sermon after 9/11 caused some of my Kansas City church folks to believe I was genuinely lost. The lectionary text assigned for the following Sunday came from Jeremiah 4 about a hot wind coming from God out of the bare desert toward God’s lost people, not to winnow or cleanse, but as a consequence for the foolishness of God’s people, as a result of their propensity to do evil more than good, and the earth was mourning, the heavens had grown black. As I watched first responders sift through the rubble of Ground Zero, searching for the lost under darkened skies, I realized that in many ways, so many of us were metaphorically lost in that rubble as well. We had put our faith and trust in the wealth and

power that those buildings represented and now we were being confronted with how futile that was. I never once said we got what we deserved and don't believe that to this day, but I do believe that greed and power are very dangerous commodities. Being lost isn't an experience exclusive to non-Christians but definitely happens to God's people. It happens within the beloved community. It's not that we cross over once and for all from a sinful lostness to a righteous foundness. We get lost over and over again, and the glorious good news is that our God comes to find us over and over again. And that's no joke, for here God is not the Comedian but the Comforter, not the Judge or Jury but the Shepherd and Housekeeper. And when at last God finds what God is looking for, God cannot contain the joy and laughter that wells up inside, inviting all to share in the recovery celebration. So are you feeling lost this day? The 13th century Sufi mystic Rumi said, "What you seek is seeking you." That is very true, so much so, that even in the most bleak and hopeless rubble of life, God still finds us. Amen.