

I once was lost

Ex 32.1, 7-14; 1 Tim 1.12-17; Ps 51.1-18; Luke 15.1-10

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It was a morning, so much like this morning. The sky was beautiful. Blue. You could see for miles. Not a cloud in the sky. And the sun! The sun bathed everything in gold.

We made our way to the train. At the station, everyone was waiting patiently. Many were talking with what must have been regular passengers. Some were quietly reading the paper. Others were chatting on their cell phones. Still others, just sat and watched. It was just a normal day for them. But, for us, it was an adventure.

The train ride itself took only about 20 or 25 minutes, depending on other rail traffic. There were not nearly enough seats to go around for everyone. But, everyone looked as they look on a normal, average day. But, we were excited, and it must have been obvious. Every once in a while, people would glance our way and smile. And, of course, all of the cars were bathed in that beautiful, brilliant sun light, coming through a cloudless sky.

We arrived through the dark tunnel into the train station itself which was abuzz with activity. Disembarking from the trains, the hundreds of people moved along toward the half a dozen escalators waiting to take us to the main station.

Station? This was more than a train station, more than just a ticket booth. No, no: here were shops of every kind, from newsstands, to a complete mall with food shops, pizza places (lots of pizza!), clothing stores, record stores.

And here, too, were many more people than we had just been with, as other trains disembarked their passengers up other escalators. No one could say where these people had come from except that before they had gotten on their trains, long before, they had come to this place from what must have been almost every continent under the sun. Every nationality seemed to be in evidence both shopping and working there.

Now, finding our way out was not easy. It seemed obvious to those people who looked as though they were off to work. They knew where they were going, but we didn't. That was part of the adventure.

But finally we did find our way out, and back into that brilliant sunlight. Yet, we were not outdoors: we were in a huge, cathedral like lobby, with windows stretching to the vaulted ceiling. Incredible. We gasped.

But, then: oh, how disappointing. Look at the line-up. And what a line! Oh, well, that's part of the adventure: sometimes you have to wait for something great.

And so we waited, and again were thrown in with all sorts of people, people who were well-dressed and not so well-dressed. People from a multitude of nationalities. I don't see anyone famous, though I kept looking, thinking that I might. I just saw a lot of ordinary, little people. People probably thought the same about us.

The people we were standing in line with seemed to be from India, from what my wife told me, likely from the area near Pakistan, where my wife was born. They were chatting away when suddenly a lady came running up to them. They looked cautiously as she came up. She shouted: Here, here are some coupons. I didn't need them. You take them!" Their caution seemed to melt away like snow in that brilliant sun outdoors and they laughed together and thanked the lady profusely in their broken English.

Finally, tickets in hand, we made our way to the obligatory security check. It was tedious but not very careful. In fact, my son Jonathan had forgotten to take his pocket knife out when he went through. It rang but no one paid any attention. They were too busy. Well, it doesn't matter: it's just another, normal day. It'll be OK.

And, then, yet another line. This time for the elevators. Fortunately it didn't take too long.

But, what was really impressive is how the elevator ride itself didn't take very long. You'd get on them (I was prepared for this since I'd been there more than once before) and they would woosh you up, 100 floors, almost to the top. Woosh!

I looked at the elevator operator: black girl, nothing extraordinary about her. I thought: what a boring job, explaining instructions time after time. And I thought what a painful job: ears popping all the time, up AND down, up AND down. Woosh, pop, woosh, pop.

But, before one could really take it all in, the elevator doors opened and there you were. It wasn't immediately apparent where "there" was since you had to exit down a windowless corridor. But, after walking down the corridor, you knew exactly where "there" was: at the top of the world. There, with the beautiful blue sky above you, partially hidden by one floor still above, but what was clear to all was that down below you was all of Manhattan. Way below. So far that Rachel wouldn't even go near the windows. Of course, you couldn't fall with the windows there but it still seemed as if you could. I knew better: we were safe here. So, I sat down as close to the window as I could get so that I could look down, way down, at the streets below, over a hundred stories below.

We walked around the four sides, looking down at the sites that were highlighted on the inner walls. There was the Statue of Liberty. There was the Empire State Building. The wall explanation told us that Central Park had been built at the end of the last century as a workers'

paradise, a place where workers who had no vacation possibilities could go to experience part of God's creation, right there in the midst of the biggest city in the world.

And, there were hundreds of tourists there from every conceivable race and nationality. People who had come to see, to enjoy the sight. Though coming from a variety of backgrounds, we were together not in a church, a temple, a mosque. We weren't there to worship. We were just there to wonder at what we were seeing.

Then we went to the top, the very top. A young Latino worker sat there, bored, making sure that the escalators worked well and that no one had difficulties. He was bored because everything worked so well.

And at the top, the very top, under only the beautiful blue sky, surrounded by the same throng of visitors, one wondered at how high above everything one could be and still be secure.

There at the top of the World Trade Center, with dozens of little people on a great adventure out of our normal lives, being attended to by hundreds of other little people who were serving us, moving us around in elevators, making sure the escalators worked well. There we were standing over the heads of thousands more little people working in the offices and shops and train station under us. There we were standing over the millions of little people -- and I mean LITTLE people -- walking on the streets below. I saw no celebrities that day, no big people, no media celebrities or politicians, in the midst of the millions that we saw that day. Just lots of little people, going about their normal lives, as we went on our adventure that August 11, 2001, an adventure, needless to say, that we will never, ever be able to repeat again, at least not as we did it that day.

Some of the most moving pictures of the events of that September 11, 3 years ago yesterday, and the days immediately following, were those scenes of people searching desperately to find the little people who had gotten lost that day:

- co-workers looked for lost co-workers
- firemen sought fellow firemen who had gotten lost
- police sought police who could not be found
- family members sought family members, and neighbours sought neighbours.

Those who searched left what they were doing, important as it was, sensitive as it was, and started looking. They didn't stop until they found or until they found that they couldn't find.

No one bothered to ask them:

- where do you think you're going?
- why are you leaving your work?
- why are you leaving your kids with the babysitter at this hour of the day?

- where are you going?

No one asked because no one needed to ask, even though the people that they were searching for were little people, people like you and me.

The parable that Jesus tells in today's Gospel is intended to shame the Pharisees and scribes who dare to ask him: "where do you think you're going? what do you think that you're doing?" Jesus, whose whole mission is to seek for the lost, the lost little ones! And Jesus in mercy, but also in strength, responds: "I'm going to find the lost."

My friends, the whole point of God's love for us is summed up in the picture of Jesus looking for the lost. Jesus is the one who realizes that a disaster has in fact happened to mankind and who, rather than thinking first of himself, goes off to search for and to find the lost. People like you and me who had gotten caught in that horrible disaster.

It happened in the day of our Lord's earthly ministry, and it still happens today, under the authority of the reigning Lord from heaven. The difference is that today it often happens as the Lord sends labourers into his vineyard and fields to do the searching.

Today where a people cries out that they are lost -- perhaps in the Fur region of Sudan -- God still leaves those who are well-fed, well-equipped, and goes out to find the lost. He knows that we will wait in patience for his return and that we will be busy about his work while he is gone.

Today, where a family member loses her way and comes to a dead-end, God goes out to find her and bring her back to her family. He knows that the family will keep the home warm and have a great meal ready for when the search party comes back.

Today, where an individual loses his way through sickness, or financial loss, or loss of a spouse, or through the slavery of addiction, God goes forth in the person of Jesus, or the Body of Christ, to search, to find, and ... not to destroy but to restore! He knows that those who were lost and know that they have been found will look after each other until his return.

There is probably no one here this morning who has not been lost at some time. Some of us have experienced not only being lost, but also being found by Jesus, who went looking for us and having found us, brought us home. But, there may be some here who are still feeling lost, who have not yet experienced what it's like to be found, and to be brought home.

This morning, as we come to communion, I want those of you who come forward knowing that you have been found to give thanks, to rejoice in your good God, and to care for those who are gathered here together. Come and as you come give thanks.

And I want those of you who still feel lost also to come forward. I want you to come forward to communion and to cry out in your hearts to Jesus that you are still lost. Please do not wait until you get so lost that you can't be found. Please come forward and cry out now and take this sacrament to your comfort. Cry out knowing that Jesus will come, that he will find you, and that he will bring you home to great rejoicing.