

Exodus 32:7-14
Psalm 51:1-11
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

So, here we are on the 15th anniversary of the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. And our scripture readings this morning are about what's lost and what's found. We lost a lot that day. We not only lost 2,996 American lives, we also lost our communal sense of safety and invulnerability. On that day, 19 terrorists hijacked 4 passenger airliners armed only with box cutters and brought about the worst destruction and loss of life on American soil since the Civil War. And it was the worst attack on American soil by a force outside of the United States since the Revolutionary War. It was a day that we won't forget. And like Pearl Harbor, it is a day that will live in infamy.

Today, we remember all the lives that were lost to us that day and all the families that were shattered. Nothing.....for us as a nation and for us individually.....has been the same since. The Pentagon has been repaired and the two World Trade Center buildings that were destroyed have been replaced by a new skyscraper, the Freedom Center, but the lives that were lost and the lives that were shattered cannot be replaced. The survivors adjusted and accommodated their loss and built new lives as best they could, but their lives will never again be the same. And since 9-11, 2001, we have been periodically reminded by terrorist attacks all over the world, that all of us in the world are more vulnerable than we ever realized or wanted to be.

Many of us remember where we were when we heard the news. And many of us remember how this nation.....and nations all over the world.....responded. As a nation, we came together as one. I don't remember a time in my life when we were ever more united than we were in the wake of 9-11. There were no Republicans and Democrats. There were no rich people and poor people. There was no 1% and the 99%. There were no social distinctions or religious differences. There were no cultural or ethnic differences. We were simply all Americans. This horrible thing had happened to all of us and we were family and friends to one another in a way that we hadn't been before and that we haven't been since. And the world responded to us with outpourings of love in all varieties. It was a most unusual and remarkable thing to witness. It was for me, one of the most vivid experiences of God in the midst of tragedy that I have ever known. It was compelling. And it was more like what I expect the kingdom of God is than anything I could have imagined. In the wake of 9-11, we got a glimpse of that kingdom. In the rubble and the destruction we experienced a powerful moment of the kingdom of God.....and then it was gone. I wanted it to stay. So many of us wanted it to stay that way. But over the days and the weeks and the months that followed, we lost that sense of divine unity with one another. We are mere human beings and we could not sustain that kind

of good will and care for one another that all of us noticed that fall in 2001. It was something else that we lost.

All of us have some experience with the sense of loss. As soon as we are born, we experience loss. We are no longer safely ensconced within our mother's body. We are thrust into the world and we have to make all kinds of adjustments just to survive. From then on, it's one loss after another as we make our way through life and embark on a journey in this life that will eventually take us back home.

So Jesus talks to us this morning about the Lost and Found. As we journey through this life, there are probably times when we are pretty sure that we've been found.....found by God. And there are other times that we know that we are lost and are having trouble finding our way. Probably the most dangerous times in our lives are when we are completely unaware that we are lost. Those are the most challenging times of all.

We find Jesus in the scripture lesson this morning, in close proximity to both the Lost and the Found in his world. At least, they think they know which are the lost and which are the found. The folks who have been following Jesus are among the ones that their world has decided are the 'lost' ones. They are hanging on his every word.....these folks that the proper society and religious folks in Jerusalem don't want to have anything to do with. In our day and age, they might be the drug dealers, or the white collar criminals who embezzle from their bosses or cheat on their income taxes. They might be the alcoholics and the drug addicts or the womanizers or the callgirls or those who have spent time in prison. Upstanding, law-abiding, nice people.....the ones that the rest of society have decided are the righteous ones.....the ones who have been 'found' simply don't hang out with these 'lost' folks. But Jesus does. These folks are 'coming near' to listen to Jesus and the Pharisees were standing close enough to hear what he was saying, so we have a very unusual group of people here listening to Jesus. One part listening intently and drawn to Jesus as if by a magnet. And another group critiquing what he has to say. They think they know which ones are the 'lost' and which ones are the 'found,' but I would suggest that there are both 'lost' and 'found' in each of these groups of people.

So Jesus tells them two parables.....both about something lost and then found. These stories are not about what we do to seek God. These are stories that reveal something about the nature of God. It's worth noting here that Jesus is telling two tales.....one about an animal and one about an inanimate object.....but he is using different genders in the two tales for the seekers.....perhaps to keep us from losing sight of the gender inclusiveness of God.....both male and female.

Jesus seems to want us to know something about what God is like. And God doesn't behave quite like we do. As a matter of fact, if you take a close look at these two stories, you can see that God is both reckless and imprudent.....at least by human standards.

As the shepherd goes searching for the one lost sheep, he leaves the 99 on their own..... out in the wilderness. They are prey to all kinds of attack from wild animals or straying from the flock

or mishaps with the landscape. The shepherd doesn't call in a sheepsitter for the flock while he is gone. He simply goes.....and leaves the 99 on their own out in the wilderness. That seems pretty reckless. Does God feel no sense of responsibility for the 99? Or is God not particularly worried about them because they aren't lost? As I was writing this, I had to smile as it occurred to me that the Occupy Movement that began in the summer of 2011 protests the unequal distribution of wealth in this country by claiming that 1% of the population controls the majority of the wealth and political influence in this country leaving the other 99% to fend for themselves. The irony might be that perhaps the 1% with all the wealth requires Jesus' undivided attention and pursuit more than the 99 on their own. Who knows?

So what we're finding out about God is that God is both male and female and that God is a bit reckless and irresponsible as a caretaker at least by our standards. In the story about the woman and the coin, we also see that God can be a bit imprudent. This woman sweeps her house diligently.....she lights a lamp and she searches carefully.....without giving up.....until she finds the one coin that she has lost. Nothing is expendable in this household. Everything, no matter how small, is important. So we know that God has all kinds of perseverance. God will not give up until what is lost is found. God is persistent. And who among us has not known that frantic feeling of turning the house upside down to find something that we simply cannot do without? And, oh the feeling we have when we find it!! It's not just an emotional feeling.....it's a physical reaction. Our breath is a huge sigh of relief and then becomes much easier. That knot in our stomach goes away. The sweaty palms dry up. And even our muscles seem to be less tense. It's a wonderful feeling. We want to celebrate. And here's the imprudent part in this story about God. The woman calls her friends and neighbors and asks them to come rejoice with her. She's going to have a party!!! It would be easy to see, that the celebration that she's having with her friends probably costs more than the value of the lost coin that she found. Clearly something none of us would do if we were trying to be prudent!! But Jesus seems to want to impress upon all his listeners the extent of the joy and exuberance that is in heaven when one who is lost is found.

Jesus tells them about the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.....and yet, these two parables are about an animal who cannot repent and a lost coin which also cannot repent. So why do you suppose Jesus adds the part of repentance? The passive nature of the two examples Jesus uses about lost and found emphasizes the crucial aspect of being back where one belongs. God as the shepherd searches and the missing sheep is returned to the flock. God as the woman searches and the coin takes its place with the other coins in the woman's purse. The sheep and the coin don't have the capacity to repent, nor are they expected to. It is enough that they are back in their rightful places.

So why is Jesus referring to the joy in heaven when one sinner repents? Remember that repenting is not about feeling sorry or doing something to make amends. Repenting is about a change of heart. Repenting is about changing our minds. Repenting is about turning around and changing direction in our actions. And who among us has not had an experience of changing our minds or even having a change of heart? Perhaps that happens when God has found us. We can resist that urge to change our minds or change our hearts, but the inspiration to repent

comes from God. That nudging that we get to look at things differently.....to act in a different way.....is a prodding from God. That desire that we have to be back where we belong.....to be reconciled with God and with others.....comes from the God who is searching us out. Our *desire* to be reconciled.....warts and all.....is God's gift to us. These two stories are not so much about the nature of the lost as they are about the nature of the One who is doing the seeking. If you notice, in all the time that Jesus spends hanging out and breaking bread with sinners, he never chastises them for their sin. He doesn't point out to them what they are doing wrong. He doesn't ever tell them that they have to mend their ways. He simply loves them. That's what God is all about. That's what Jesus is putting out into the world. That's the compelling magnetism of Jesus.

It's not about us finally seeing the error of our ways and giving up all the sinful things that we do. It is about God seeking us and finding us and loving us into wanting to be reconciled to God.....in wanting to yield to God.....to take direction from God.....to set aside our own desires in order to step into the will of God for us.....in wanting to snuggle up under God's wing in the most permanent and overarching safety security we will ever know. The only true safety.....the only safety that will replace the collective sense of safety that we lost 15 years ago on this date.

It's about letting this persistent, unfailing, and loving God find us.

And it's about our sigh of relief when God does!

And it's about the unbounded joy in heaven when we respond.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.