

Pentecost C17

September 11, 2016

“Which One of You?”

Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair

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Luke 15:1-10

15Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable: ⁴“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷Just 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. ⁸“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Once upon a time I was fortunate enough to visit Japan. It was a business trip and I was traveling alone. One day I had just a single appointment on the other side of Tokyo and I decided to walk. It was a long walk- about five hours, but I figured it would be a good way to see some of the city and meet some of the people. And it was. Every time I needed some help with directions there was someone willing to overcome our language differences and point me down the right street with a smile. On the way home it grew dark and I was a little worried. I knew I was in the right part of the city but I couldn't figure out exactly where. It was 10 p.m., the streets were empty. I was lost. Down the block I could barely make out someone coming toward me. It was a policeman. He said something in Japanese. I replied, “Do you speak English?” He shook his head no. I showed him the brochure from my hotel and he motioned for me to follow him. For the next 30 minutes he walked me through several neighborhoods all the way back home. The lost had been found. I was so happy. And he was very glad to have helped.

There are all kinds of ways to be lost.

According to Jesus' critics, tax collectors and sinners were lost. And Jesus was eating his meals and spending his time with these losers. They were lost in their own bad behavior and if they were ever going to be allowed back into society or through the doors of any sanctuary, they needed to straighten up first and make themselves acceptable.

But there Jesus was, rubbing elbows at the table with all the people everyone else thought were lost.

Did you see the picture in the paper this past week of Travis Rudolph, the Florida State football player? He and his teammates were visiting a middle school in Tallahassee. Rudolph had met some of his sports heroes as a young boy and now as a college phenom he wanted to take his turn inspiring kids. Rudolph was in the school cafeteria at lunch time and he took his tray of food over to a big table where one boy, Bo Paske, was sitting all alone. Rudolph, 20 years old, looked down at the boy and asked if he could sit with him, and the 6th grader said, “Sure.” So he did and they ate their lunch together. The sixth grader's mother is calling the Florida State wide receiver a hero now, because young Bo often eats his lunch alone. He is autistic. But Rudolph found him in the sea of 6th graders and thought maybe he could make a difference in one kid's life.

There all kinds of ways to be lost.

Fifteen years ago today, the twin towers across the river were attacked. On his way down the stairs from the 104th floor of the second tower, Welles Crowther, a young equities trader, found a group of bewildered employees waiting in the smoke and confusion for elevators. He gathered them up and walked them down 15 flights from which they were able to finish their escape. Then he went back up and found more people who were dazed and panicked and he led them down to safety. And he did this several more times until the building collapsed. We know it was Welles who did this because the people he rescued said he had a bandana around his nose and mouth, something he had carried with him since he was a boy.

Jesus tells stories about the lost sheep and the lost coin. It is important they be found. But he also tells us about himself and the character of God. Jesus intends to look until all are found.

In a certain church the deacons realized there were people disappearing right before their eyes. Maybe due to illness or age, or discouragement or dissatisfaction, there were people who stopped worshipping or taking part in ministry with their church. So they set up something called “shepherds.” They collected a group of friendly church members whom they trained and gave the names of ten people to call—to check in with- to become aware of. Those who needed pastoral care were directed to the pastor. Every year, every person in that congregation was contacted in the spring and in the fall.

We are starting a new ministry here at Central with young children and their families in our community. We’ve heard that some kids, by the time they are three years old, are already two years behind in their language and social development. There is concern over whether they will be able to catch up. Our mission is to go out and find them and their families and serve them so not one young life will be lost for lack of trying.

We do this because God does it. We look for the lost because God has looked for the lost. There have been times when God felt like giving up, throwing in the towel. Times when God said of the chosen people, “I’ve had it with these people who insist on turning away from me.” Yet, it is God’s way to keep looking.

In Jesus Christ, God comes looking for you and me every time we go the wrong way. Jesus still goes looking for the forgotten and the rejected and the terrified. And he looks not just to find them but to bring them back to rejoin the community, to restore them, to bring us all together.

“Which one of you,” Jesus says, “will join me to look and to find, and then celebrate with the angels in heaven?”