

*The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost*

Joel 2:23-32

Psalm 65

2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18

Luke 18:9-14

When I was about nine years old, my parents had these friends named the McColgins. They lived in Bethlehem, Connecticut, which is this beautiful rural area. They lived on a farm that was on the top of the hill that had gradually become a forest around it. And so, this beautiful farm sat on the top of this hill and then there were 144 acres of forest around them. My father and Mac McColgin were friends and Mac McColgin was passionate about horses. And he like to do something called The Hunters Pace in which they would kind of track riders as they made their way around a 144-acre circuit.

And as they were making their way, they would post people where you would have to time them and get the number of the rider so that you could somehow see who won the pace. My father was an excellent rider he often won, which meant that I became part of his pastime. And at nine years old, I was sent off with a partner to man one of the checkpoints on the 144-acre property. My partner had a clipboard and I had a watch. He was a little bit older than I was, so after a little bit of time he took the watch away from me and we were to count the riders as they came, get the time, get the number, and then report it back at the end of the day.

I became kind of bored after watching one or two riders pass and I decided to walk home. I was pretty sure I knew the way, and so I began to walk through this forest in which there were logging roads, because they logged it for a bit, and there were well-manicured trails that crossed it and then there were these deer trail's that were very narrow that the deer would kind of blaze themselves.

And I was walking for quite a while and I was getting a little bit nervous. And then I realized that I was passing the same tree again and I realized that I was going in a circle. Somehow I was getting so far off that I was going in a circle and I began to panic a little bit. I heard some voices in the distance, so I went walking towards the voices along one of the logging roads. And I thought what I heard was my parents having an argument, but they're having one of those arguments that parents have when the children aren't around. They're arguing over where to go and their voices were so high and so extreme that I was afraid that they weren't actually my parents. They were strangers having an argument and if I were to walk in on them, I didn't know what would happen to me. Who knows where that anger would go?

And so I walked the other way and I got lost again. And I somehow came up with the idea of trying to find some high ground in which I could somehow get my bearings. And so I began to climb this hill and I came to a beautiful field. There was a farmer on a tractor in the field, and so I walked over to the farmer. And he turned off his tractor and I said, "Do you know Mac McColgin?" And he said, "No." And then I said, "Can I use your phone?" He said, "Well, it's way over there in the house." And then I was really starting to despair and I turned around and I

*The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost*

realized that the farmer was on a hillside. I looked across this valley and I could see Mac McColgin's white house on the top of the other hillside. I knew that if I could just stay straight and follow my feet that I would perhaps get there.

And so, I began to go and I refused to take any of the paths or any of the roads or any of the deer paths. I just began to go straight as I could which meant I was going through a lot of bramble and a lot of lot of sticks and a lot of leaves. And my hands began to get cut and got a couple of things in my face, my clothing started to tear, but after about an hour and a half I hit a clearing and I saw some children playing. They ran over to me and they said, "Everybody's been looking for you." And we walked into the house and I was just exhausted. They asked me if I was hungry. I was actually thirsty, dying of thirst, and I'd found my way back.

Now I begin with this story of being lost because I want to convey an incredibly important point about today's gospel, which is that this gospel is really about learning that we are lost. By that I mean that it's typical, as with all other parables of Jesus, it's typical for us to fall into the trap of drawing an easy conclusion by what we have read. We read that the Pharisee exalted himself and the tax collector humbled himself; therefore, those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

But, in fact, the trap we tend to fall into when we read this gospel, and it happens to everyone, I think, is our first inclination is to say, I thank thee God that I am not a Pharisee. I am modest about my achievements. And whenever I do any good I make sure it says Anonymous in the church bulletin. I try to be so suitably humbled before others so that they can actually see the radiance that is actually shining from me.

We all have a tendency to self justify. We all have a tendency to differentiate ourselves from what the Pharisee has done, But, in fact, this is a story about being lost and the irony of the parable is that it is those who are lost who are actually found. Throughout the Gospel of Luke there are these parables about being lost and being found and they are meant to convey to us an incredibly important point about who we are in our most authentic self and who God is as is promised through God's son, Jesus.

So prior to this parable, we have a parable that starts it off – the Parable of the Lost Sheep in which we learned that the Kingdom of God is as if a shepherd would leave 99 sheep and go seek out and find the one sheep who was lost. And immediately after that there's the Parable of the Lost Coin which says that the Kingdom of God is as if a woman would lose a coin and would spend the whole day cleaning her house until that coin was found.

And after that there is the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which is actually better understood as the parable of the lost son. It is here that we first hit the irony of today's gospel because the son who is lost is not the son who has gone off and spent half of the family inheritance and made his way back to be received into his father's arms. No, the son who is lost is the older brother who is lost in his resentment and bitterness. So that is the parable of the lost son.

### *The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost*

And more recently, we visited the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus and that is a parable of a lost reward because the rich man ignores the poor man at his gate and having everything he becomes lost and loses his reward.

All of these parables lead us to today's gospel which might be called The Parable of the Lost Way. Because although both the tax collector and the Pharisee know their way to the temple physically, one of them has lost his way to God and the other, being lost somehow is found. And you see this in the gospel itself. There's a kind of hint that this is what it's about when Jesus says two things. The first, he says this one rather than the other went down to his home justified. Hmm. Which injects into the parable some action and travel.

And, of course, the second point in the gospel where Jesus gives a kind of metaphor for being lost is in the Greek word for sinner, hamartanó, which means someone who has missed the mark, someone who is lost. The tax collector says, have mercy on me, Lord, for I am a sinner. Have mercy, Lord, for I am lost.

Now, I began with a story about being physically lost because when I think about it, it still terrifies me. And truth be told, I have been lost in many other ways. I think actually all of us know what it's like to be lost in one way or another. All of us know what it's like to lose the thread of joy in our lives and to experience some despondency. All of us know what it's like to achieve something that turns as soon as it falls into our hands and we know the lost, how being lost in the form of being disillusioned.

All of us know what it's like to lose purpose in our lives or to experience a relationship that suddenly breaks down and suddenly we experience a kind of disorientation. All of us I think know the crippling effect of disease in our life particularly when it comes in the form of a persistent disease or addiction. All of us know what it's like to experience the kind of dislocation that comes in loneliness. More than 50 percent of Americans today suffer from loneliness. Loneliness has become a mental health crisis in this country. And finally all of us know I think what it's like to experience being lost in the form of distrust when the things that we used to rely on in this world suddenly prove themselves to be all too human and all too fallen to give us any firmness, any sense of foundation.

So all of us, I think, know what it's like to be lost. And that existential sense of being lost is truly terrifying. And it's hard for us perhaps the day after an incredible victory by the University of Michigan football team over Notre Dame to get in touch with that sense of being lost. I think all of us know in one way or another what that experience feels like. And we spend a lot of energy trying to compartmentalize that feeling, trying to forget that feeling, trying to move past that feeling, trying to limit the power that feeling has on us. But in reality all of those compensating strategies are merely a short-term fix to a long-term problem.

What makes Christianity revelatory, what makes the good news of Jesus Christ real, what makes our voice distinctive among all the other voices in this world speaking for God is the fact that we believe that our Lord has come to seek and save the lost. That Jesus Christ loves the lost and the

*The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost*

moments in which we experience that sense of dislocation and disorientation and disillusionment and disease. In those moments we are actually surrounded by grace and love. Those moments in which God seems very far away are in fact moments in which God is intimately near.

Amazing Grace, How sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me I  
once was lost but now am found  
Was blind but now I see.

The nature of Christianity pivots on the acknowledgement that we are lost. And that only God can find us. And that love that we experience in God's presence, in those moments in which even God himself feels absent is actually the moment in which we have the greatest comfort in our lives.

There is one more point in today's gospel that we need to attend to and that's the fact that the tax collector in the parable actually only does half a prayer. He beats his chest and he says have mercy on me, there's no prayer of repentance. There's no sacrifice made. The tax collector has only done half a prayer. And yet that is enough. And I want to suggest to you that though God loves the lost and that means that God loves you, keep in mind that God is never finished with us.

John Newton who wrote those words to Amazing Grace in 1779 is often credited with being a leader of the Abolitionist Movement in England, of someone who successfully led a country out of the institution of slavery. In fact, it was 10 years after he wrote the words "I once was lost but now am found," that Newton actually wrote his first track opposing the slave trade. So God was not finished with John Newton. But God did work in that insight that he had that God loved him even though he was lost. And that is good news, too.

Last week I suggested to you that Luke was a kind of primer in prayer. I believe this parable today is yet another primer in prayer. It is an invitation to be particularly faithful to that experience in which we recognize that we are not sufficient to ourselves. And that we need God constantly to be present in our lives – that we are lost without God. And it's in stepping into that authentic space about ourselves, that truth about ourselves, and staying with that truth and keeping that memory green that we begin to experience more powerfully the grace and love and mercy of God in our lives.

I offer you a couple of images today and a poem to put a little bit of flesh on today's Gospel. The first image is on the back page of your bulletin and it's of a close-up of just a portion of Rembrandt van Rijn's famous Return of the Prodigal Son. This is a painting that many have noticed and many have focused on the return of the son to the father and the beautiful hands that the father has, one which looks masculine and one which looks feminine, that are draped around the son's shoulders as he kneels before his father and his welcomed home.

***The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost***

But Rembrandt added one detail that does not appear in that parable from Luke. He puts an image of the tax collector sitting down and watching the exchange closely and seeing a father who has welcomed back a son who has spent half of his inheritance.

And Rembrandt never painted a portrait of today's gospel, but he did paint a portrait that's on the front cover of your bulletin. And it's there that he takes a complete change in how the parable is depicted in the gospel. It's a pen and ink on wash kind of painting. It's beautiful. It's a pen and ink portrait. And in the forefront you have that same tax collector who having seen mercy shown by an earthly father to his son goes to the temple to beg for mercy himself.

And in the back you have a Pharisee with a hand over his heart being sincere about his own self congratulation. And where the parable depicts the tax collector in the back of the temple, Rembrandt in this sketch depicts the tax collector at the center. He is the point of where all the action in the picture takes place.

The second image I want to offer you is a poem I wrote when I wanted to try to follow that bead of what it meant to experience God in the moment of being both lost and found. It's a poem I've entitled *Infinitely Close*.

You are infinitely near  
Closer to me than I am to myself  
Yet you remain farther than the stars

When I look for you in the night of my despair  
You appear suddenly as a voice within me  
When I speak as though your voice were mine

The word you graciously gave me leaves me  
There is no absence where you are not present  
There is no presence where you are fully found

Light of my heart  
Love of my life  
Song of my voice  
Word of my faith

You have never left me alone  
Even in my loneliness you are with me  
Let me never forget you as you never forget me

One of the images that I kept in mind as I was writing this poem was actually based upon that experience of walking across that field and down into that Valley and up to the McColgin house. And the determination I had at nine years old to somehow keep on putting one foot right in front of the other no matter what happened. It kept coming to me, but the way that I was thinking

***The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost***

about it changed it. Because I suddenly realized that the core of the story of my life is that it is God and Christ who has walked directly to me. And God and Christ who experienced harm and God and Christ who went and bypassed familiar places, who ignored the paths that others had walked so that He could find his way home to me. May we all come home in that way by realizing how much the distance that Christ has come to us. Amen.

[End of Recording]