



## **Sunday September 11 2016: Pentecost 17: St. Clement's, Lynn Valley**

### **Luke 15:1-10**

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And 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.' Just 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.

"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? When 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.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

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A couple have just had a fight and are sitting together on their couch in stony silence. Each of the two believe that they were right in the argument. The clock ticks and minutes go by as each wonders: Who's going to make the first move? Who will be the one to reach out a hand to the other, no matter who is right and who is wrong?

A homeless man has worn out his welcome at the local church where he shows up for a meal program once a week and, on occasion, for church. Having promised to get into recovery months ago, the man has once again appeared on Sunday morning, slurring his words, asking for money. Who, if anyone, will go up to him and despite his disappointing behavior, greet him, get him a cup of coffee and figure out with kindness and firmness what to next? Whether they believe he deserves it or not who, if anyone, will reach out to him?

Now think of us—of you or I, day in and day out, week in and week out, year in and year out, trying to make decisions about what we are going to do: whether to reach a hand out

toward someone who, in our estimation, may not deserve it, whether to bring into our orbit people who have wandered far afield, whether to persist in connecting to those we or others may see as “other,” as wrong, or as unworthy of the effort.

And so I wonder: What’s going on as you and I struggle with these kinds of situations and these kinds of questions—struggling with whether to reach out or not to a person we may believe is wrong about something, struggling with our judgements of others and whether they are worthy of our efforts, struggling with our feelings of vulnerability when we do reach out to someone who we believe is lost to us and our feelings of guilt when we don’t? What’s going on?

In our Gospel for today the Pharisees are grumbling about the fact that Jesus spends time and eats with tax collectors and sinners, people who they think are clearly unworthy of Jesus’ attention because in their way of thinking, these are people unworthy of God’s attention. In response to the grumbling, Jesus tells two stories: In one, a man who has a flock of 100 sheep leaves 99 of them in the wilderness to find the one sheep that has wandered off. In the second, a female householder has ten coins, loses one of them, and then lights a lamp, and sweeps and searches the entire house in order to find the one that is lost.

Some, as they hear these stories, in my experience, immediately go to the impossibility of behaving like the man or the woman who will not stop until they find what they’ve lost. For in many ways what the man and the woman are doing doesn’t make sense: Why, for instance, would you desert 99 sheep in order to go after just one? Why would you obsessively go after finding the one coin when you held nine others in your hands?

But this, of course, is not the point. These two parables like all parables are not at the most fundamental level about what we would do using our logic, our sense of efficiency or our notions of what is right. Rather, these parables are about what God does do against all logic, against our notions of efficiency, and without much regard for what we think is right.

God is the one who will not rest until the lost are found; who will not stop until the one is reunited with the many. God is the one who, our parable suggests, will sweep every corner of the universe to find the one or the many who have slipped out of sight, who we or others thought were not worth the effort. God is the one who does these things and is doing these things even as we wonder and struggle with what we should be doing.

And so my belief is this: whether we are conscious of it or not, what enables us even to grapple with reaching out our hand to those we might or others might consider to be unworthy or lost, what enables us even to consider this though everything within us is afraid or thinks it unwise, what enables us at times to do this is what I would call participation in the divine urge: finding ourselves swept up in God’s own energy that cannot help but gather in, that cannot help but find what is lost, that cannot help but bring the wanderer home, that cannot help but pull a lost one into life with others, regardless of their deserving it, regardless of how long it will take and regardless of how much effort it will entail. It is the divine urge that you and I are struggling to understand, struggling to resist and struggling to give ourselves to all at the same time.

But this sense of struggle is not the whole story....for if we look again at our two parables, they are not at all about struggling to do the right thing by someone or something that is lost, are they? Rather they are about celebration and delight.

For once the man has found the lost sheep, once the woman has found the lost coin, both call together their friends and neighbours for a celebration, both give themselves over to delight. And so these stories are not about the drudgery or the depleting effect of God's searching after his or her own. This story is not about God's actions as a series of rather dour moral "to dos" that God has to do because God is good. No instead, the divine urge to gather up who and what is lost and bring them home is all about delight.

What this means, then, is that the divine urge God that is always working to entice us into the action of recovering the lost, of reaching out our hand to the other has as its aim the delight of reunion and relationship.

And so, where do you feel drawn this season into God's own relentless and joyful action that cannot help but waste its precious time in restoring the lost, in reaching out a hand to those whom we believe may not deserve it? What form does this take for you? Who (maybe in your own household, your own neighbourhood, your own church) does it involve?

This year, this precious year ahead of us all, don't let your reaching out to those lost to you be about drudgery or simply doing the right thing. Don't give in to thinking that the life of God, that the divine urge we have been called into is all about an impossible moral "to do" list that in the end depletes us. Instead, look for the delight that God has in store for you, for the lost and for the world. Look for the delight in reunion and relationship that waits for us all when the lost are found, for this is what God wants for herself and for her people.