

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
11 September 2016

Scripture readings:

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 Psalm 14 1 Timothy 1:12-17 Luke 15:1-10

These are interesting stories in the gospel text for today which I find engaging. I'm sure you do too. They're not stories that are peculiar or strange to us. We've heard them encouraging us to turn around to God. I'm particularly moved by the imagery of the lost sheep and the imagery of where the shepherd finds the lamb, he puts it over his shoulders. We've talked about this before, about how I find the traditional depiction of the good shepherd in many church windows as a bearded lady with three poodles as an unsatisfactory depiction of Jesus and what's going on and particularly with stories like this where there needs to be a youngster crawling under thorn bushes to grab with a hook perhaps an animal that's a little bit wild and unruly and extricate him from a dangerous place and then not only to save the animal but then to sling that filthy thing over his shoulders. I've gone on at length before about Ben the sheep who was in the field next to our home. Ben was way beyond his prime but he didn't know it. I think perhaps some of the filthiest things I've ever seen are the nether parts of a male sheep - and smelly!

And here is this image of Jesus having retrieved this cruddy beast - and even if it had been to the poodle parlor before it got lost - having been lost, by now you know it was filthy. He puts the worst and dirtiest parts over his shoulders at his face to secure and care for that cruddy beast.

And then the story of the woman with the coins who loses one and finds one reminds me of a night on the ship on our way to England, a formal evening. Felicity looked beautiful. I tried my best to be decent. I have an old brocaded waistcoat and a bow tie as one does for a formal evening on the ship. I no sooner sat down and then one of the beautifully covered buttons went "bink."*[laughter]* I couldn't find it, and Felicity in all of her elegant grandeur got up, went onto the floor on all fours *[laughter]*, felt under the table and came up with my button - which I promptly put in the pocket and thanked her for. There was great joy because if I'd lost that button it would have meant replacing all of them because they were covered with the same fabric as the waistcoat.

And then I thought some years ago I used to wear my grandmother's wedding ring which my mother gave to me when I preached my first sermon. It was wearing, and at one point I took it off and I put it away and I said to myself, "*Self, you will never remember where you have put this.*" I still don't know where that ring is! *[laughter]*

This whole business of being lost and being found, being treasured - circumstances notwithstanding - so much so that our perception of God, Jesus' perception of the Almighty, our perception of Jesus somehow embodying or representing the Almighty is so significantly different from the operative perception of God which is alive and well among the scribes and Pharisees. Now let's not be hard on the scribes and Pharisees. They were good, faithful, church-going people, like you and me. They sincerely wanted to do it right, and they invested a lot of energy and time and money, but the scribes and Pharisees were grumbling. Well, that sounds like church activity. *[quiet laughter!]* They were grumbling because Jesus seemed to be sitting at the wrong table at coffee hour. Jesus wasn't with the congregational leaders. Jesus was sitting there with newcomers and people who had been lost and who were dirty and who were not careful with the ten coins that they had, dropped those, and all the rest of it. And they were grumbling because Jesus' concept of God was different from theirs.

They, I believe, to a major degree were in search of a lost or hidden God. Their God needed to be jollificated, needed to be cheered up. Their God needed to be made to like them, and they knew what they had to do to make God like them. You had to sacrifice the right animals for the right reasons. You had to observe the right seasons. You had to wear the right clothing, you had to eat the right things, and especially you had to have the right friends because a man is known by the company he keeps. Women don't need to be known at all. [laughter] That's the way it worked. Except for a few things: laundry, cooking...procreation is one of them.

So Jesus comes up with this cockamammy idea of what God might be like. Jesus' idea of God is not an obfuscated, hidden, distant, angry male with a quiver full of lightning bolts ready to hurl at people when they were wrong or made mistakes or disobeyed. Now we get a sense of where those ideas might have come from, for example, the reading from Jeremiah. "*At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem: A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my people, not to winnow or cleanse - a wind too strong for that.*"

Well, we all can believe and confess that if God is anything in terms of what we think about God, God is powerful enough to do anything God wants. But Jesus is positing that the nature of God is different from the nature of an old, angry, bearded white man - or a Semitic man. Jesus is positing that God might be like a shepherd, a youngster, not a bearded lady in a bathrobe who's just stepped out of the shower, but the kind of shepherd that was depicted in a window in my home congregation about which I've told you - a youngster too young to grow a beard, in a tunic with sandals tied up his leg, holes and tears repaired in his tunic because he's been working, crawling under bushes, taking care of his sheep, following them into rocky places where they need to be led out of to find food and water and all the rest of it, making sacrifices for the flock as opposed to the flock making sacrifices for the shepherd. It's a strange idea to imagine that God might be more like Felicity on her hands and knees in her gorgeous formal outfit looking for my button. It was embarrassing in the end, wasn't it, but was I glad to have had the button found? You bet!

These are radical ideas about God which I think make the possibility of religion becoming a bit more radical if we read them and spend time with them. And so Jesus presents us with a concept of a God who pursues us more clearly than a God who needs to be pursued, a God who might be in the lavatory with you at home as much as she might be in the church on Sunday morning, a God whom we proclaim, believe, teach and confess is all the time everywhere present, a God who lives with us even when we're not choosing particularly to live with that God, and a God who follows us relentlessly wherever we go no matter how far and how distant, how dirty, how depraved, how awful, how ugly that place may be that we enter. And behind us, if we listen, there will always be the tread of a God who is pursuing us and asking us less to pursue God than simply to stop and turn around and see who's coming toward us.

Some of you may know a famous poem known as *The Hound of Heaven* written by Francis Thompson who died in 1907. Here are a few words from that poem which may give you a sense of his concept of what a God who pursued him was like:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter,
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,*

*From those strong Feet that followed, followed after,
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat - and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet -
"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."*

It's felt that this man was a drug addict. He had a difficult, dependent life, and there are even theories posited that he may have been Jack the Ripper. But he has this extraordinary perception of a God who will not let him go. I think that's the message that Jesus has for the scribes and Pharisees, for the religious people of his day. He doesn't tell them not to worship God their way. I mean after all, we did gather here today for some reason. I hope you didn't wait until this morning to find God only in here. I think she's bigger than this little box. But this little box becomes an extraordinary vista when we gather and experience God's presence among us, and when we sit here and worship here and encourage each other to *stop* for a minute and turn around and see the God running toward us, following us, coming to us with a desire not only to catch us but to crawl inside of us through our ears and our very guts and into our body and live with us so that wherever we go, God goes with us! That's the glory of the Church, that we stop and allow ourselves to be caught, retrieved from under the bush, found by the woman with the lamp - the coin that has rolled away and is brought back.

Last November I worshiped at the Abbey Church in Lancaster in the northwest of England where there had been a gay priest for many years. There were some gay couples worshiping there, and the senior warden was explaining the changing nature of the population of the congregation to somebody, and he said, "*I really don't know what we would have done about this five years ago, but now we just treat them as if they're normal.*" [laughter]

And isn't that the joy of Jesus' perception of who God is: "*I just treat them as if they're all lost and need to be found and retrieved and brought back by me, by my love, not by what they do.*" This is the great glory of being a sacramental church because when we turn to the sacraments, to Baptism and the Eucharist, we teach and confess and acknowledge that this is nothing we do but this is the way we express what God does for us. This is God's activity, God coming to us, and God's intention for us is simply (a) that we are found, and then this is wisdom from the pope this morning, (b) that we rejoice that this makes us glad because we are told in scripture that when God finds us, God is delighted. Now that's a big difference from God is angry and ready to shoot a lightning bolt at you. This is why we call this message good news, why we call it gospel, and why we rejoice and dare to love each other and treat each other as if we were all saved by God and by nothing else but God's grace.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.