

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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The story is told by Fr. Chris Gray of Southwestern Florida of a man in one of his parishes who had carried a pocket cross for 20 years. At the time he purchased it, it had only cost 25 cents. It was made out of tin. Those early, metal, cross in my pocket had some pretty sharp edges, but now after 20 years of holding and fidgeting in his pocket unconsciously, and rubbing intentionally when praying, the sharp edges were now worn smooth.

It was kind of like a security blanket, a constant reminder of God's love and presence with him always. And now it was lost! With obsessive diligence he searched the house, the car, and his office. He looked everywhere, and couldn't find it anywhere.

You know how he felt? It was as though a part of him had died. There was a sense of emptiness each day as he dressed knowing it was absent, and throughout the day as he reached into his pocket but found no familiar shape of the cross to the touch of his fingers.

Then two months later during a seasonal heavy cleaning day at his house, the cross turned up. The couch had been moved for cleaning and vacuuming, and there it was, like an old friend, laying on the hidden carpet.

As you can imagine, he celebrated and rejoiced, for that which was lost now was found. And the rejoicing went on for several days – not like killing the fatted calf and feasting with friends – but very simply in his mind and heart each time he put his hand into his pants pocket and his fingers felt, even caressed, the sides and edges and front and back of his lost-then-found cross in his pocket.

His wife had a similar incident when her purse turned up missing with credit cards, check book and cash. Some of you have the same story and know the anxiety. Her purse was lost for 4 or 5 hours until an honest person turned it in at the grocery store. As you can imagine, they had a frantic time retracing their steps around town looking for it. And there was great rejoicing in the family when it was found.

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In today's Gospel Jesus tells similar stories in order to illustrate heaven's similar rejoicing over one has been lost to God and now found. He illustrates this with the stories of a shepherd and of a woman who loses a coin.

Although it can be difficult for us urban folks to understand, but not so difficult for any of us who have had ranching and farming experience, Jesus says the shepherd with 100 sheep who loses one sheep will leave the other 99 behind and search for the lost one.

As well, it may be difficult for us to understand the loss of one coin sending us in a scurry, until she finds the one that was lost. It may help to know that the coins are literally identified as drachmas, which would be the equivalent of one day's wages. Think about what one day's wages in your pocket means, and how if you are on a tight budget that could mean serious depletion of your expenses budget.

In any case, these examples would immediately have been understood by Jesus' listeners, and they would be able to immediately relate as in each story, rejoicing takes place after both the sheep and coin are found.

Let's now apply the Englishman John Colet's early 16th century demand for studying scripture in context to give us understanding and meaning. If you look again at the Gospel for today, one of the first things we can see is to whom Jesus is speaking and why, and second, he's not just telling stories about finding lost property or things, but about people and their worth in God's eyes so that He cares to find them when they are lost. And third, what actually leverages the rejoicing in heaven.

To me, that means it can be seen in that way as reconciliation and renewal and even evangelism. The sheep and coins are simply an analogy of the extent that God will go to find us and reach out to us. I want to focus on evangelism this morning.

Evangelism is a simple word. Evangelizing is defined by the word itself as used in the new testament: it simply means, sharing or telling good news. And in new testament usage and practice, in those first 70 to 100 years from the first time Jesus himself told the world who He was and what He was here to do, it wasn't just ANY good news. ANY good news might mean we suddenly had enough money to put in Air Conditioning in the nave and chancel, in San Diego of all places. Or it might mean telling about how successful our Choir Appreciation party was yesterday. Or good news might mean gasoline prices going back down to 3.15 per gallon. In the new testament however, it's not just good news they were talking about but THE good news. And so to evangelize is

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to share the good news about Jesus Christ. That he is the one who had been prophesied to come to us, and to save us from our sinful lives in a sinful world.

THE good news in this passage of scripture is that God loves everyone, and NO ONE is to be set aside from being able to take hold of the Good News, that is, in the flesh, Jesus.

Now, the prompt for Jesus to speak out with this message is found in the first sentence of the gospel, when the Pharisees complained about Jesus allowing accessibility including sharing a meal with you know tax collectors and sinners. They didn't object out loud and directly to Jesus, though. As Luke tells the story, these objections were "MURMURED."

Shall we practice murmuring, just to get a feel for it? You keep your mouth and teeth almost shut, and then speak through them in a low voice something that you want to say, as a complaint. Like, "I can't believe she came to church looking like that." In this case, the Pharisees saying something like, "Jesus is letting these sinners get close to him. Which sounds like this: [murmur last sentence] So you try it now, say anything like that at that level of volume, on 3..... Well that was fun!

Lets practice that again, as if we were in a dramatic presentation, you murmur, and then I'll interrupt you like I think Jesus did.

Just one thing...I want to finish my sermon today, so when I interrupt you, please don't keep on murmuring. Here we go, murmur on 3....

[interrupting] "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness,?"

Very good. You are now certified murmurers. Let's not be that way, if you do, repent quickly.

So now we get a feel for Jesus' Spirit-inspired motivation to speak these stories. Jesus is going to go on now and speaking to the Pharisees, within clear earshot of the tax collectors and sinners the basic message of Good News for each and every one of us.

The clear implication is that God the Father – as Jesus teaches in the Gospels quite directly -- actively seeks us out when we are still afar off from him in faith in Christ, or have wandered away, or are lost, or absent. In God's eyes everyone has value! Each one us! God will never stop reaching out for us! What did Jesus say about the shepherd and

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the woman? They will not stop looking until they find it. So the same with God and us. And the words of Jesus in the hearing of the tax collectors and sinners means he will be looking for us Regardless of what we have done or ever might do. "We" might stop looking for our "stuff" or our "things" when they are lost, but God never does!

When we lose something and can't find it, we generally replace it with something new. Maybe that is why we have been called the throw-away society. But in God's case: God doesn't throw us away. God doesn't write us off, although he was close to doing so in today's reading from Exodus. Listen to the last verse: " And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people.." Moses and his companions were a tough group, and they just received mercy.

This might be the end of the teaching and instruction on evangelism, that is, that God keeps on seeking until he finds. The ancient genius theologian Origen was once accused of saying that even Lucifer will be "evangelized" if you will by God's relentlessness, and purification, and brought into heaven. In doctrinal terms this kind of "no one left behind" evangelistic theology is known simplistically as Universalist Salvation. It is not warranted by scripture, and Origen wrote an entire document, A Letter to Friends, denying vehemently such a theology coming from him. As he said, to consider that one, Satan or Lucifer, would be afforded the opportunity to enter heaven after his own judgement and expulsion has already taken place is ludicrous.

Frankly, our Episcopal version of evangelism in general, has been just this for 60 years, without the final key to assist others to be found and brought into heaven with rejoicing. We don't want to step on anyone's toes with this last part of the good news picture. And in results in evangelism evidenced in baptisms and confirmations for those 60 years, well, you can see. Absolutely ludicrous.

Surely we all want all to get into heaven, and the stories suggest strongly that might be the case! But there is one part of the ending sentence that says otherwise, and provides the key. Jesus said

"Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

When God goes looking and finding, our response is to be repentance. "

Just to underscore that necessity, in the 51st Psalm today we hear powerful words of repentance from the lips of the psalmist as he prays to the Lord, pleading for forgiveness and restoration. He says in verses 1, 2 and 11:

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Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness; *
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.

Wash me through and through from my wickedness *
and cleanse me from my sin.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, *
and renew a right spirit within me.

These are words from one who knows the importance of falling on their face before a loving and forgiving God.

I remember clearly the scripture verse that was given in the bishop's sermon at the service in 1966 when the sacrament of Confirmation was conferred upon me. It's written in my old 1928 Prayer Book. It is the same as what St. Paul confirms as God's undying devotion in reclaiming us as he writes to Timothy:

"I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, because, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, and persecutor, and a man of violence, I received mercy..... for Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

I do hope you see that a HUGE aspect of the Good News is that God even ALLOWS us to offer repentance, that is, after we have engaged in sinful behavior and gotten ourselves lost, we are given this amazing grace opportunity to recognize that we've rolled off the table and fallen, repent of it, and ask to be redeemed, to let him pick us up and put on his shoulders.

So here is the full story of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, found exactly the same in Both stories: that God will never give up on us And, when we turn our lives over to him, there is rejoicing in Heaven. And as noted, a portion of this good news is that not one person is exempt from this hound of heaven, and nothing we do makes us unacceptable for such pursuit: not our incompetence, our negligence, our rebellion, our misuse of talent and resources, nor even our selfishness and sinfulness.

The evidence of this is the most extravagant gift of all time -- the gift of his Son, Jesus, given on a cross for your sins and mine. It is this gift that tells us how valuable we are in the sight of God and how far God will go to search out that which is lost and invite us back into relationship.

Our part then in sharing this good news, to be evangelists by our baptismal promises, is to include these same three things:

May we accept his love and forgiveness and share it with others.

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May we keep seeking out by prayer and opportunity those who are still lost.
May we see value and worth in others. All others, as God sees it in each of us. May we not be afraid to share the need for repentance in those who desire to believe in Christ, and to invite it at that moment.
When we do so, the same necessities will be in place, just as Jesus shared needs to happen, and then there is rejoicing in heaven!

And let us come daily in our own lives as disciples. The Psalmist said it, and we can daily: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. When it is...there is rejoicing in heaven!

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