

14C Pentecost: Proper 19

September 15, 2019

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Luke's, Hollister

Exodus 32:7-14 God reconsiders punishing the people for making the golden calf and worshipping it.

1 Tim 1:12-17 Paul acted ignorantly in unbelief; the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Luke 15:1-10 The parable of the Lost Sheep, the parable of the Lost Coin; God finds us where we are.

Theme: We can leave the fold, we can get distracted and separated, but God comes to find us and bring us home. Our God's kingdom is not complete until ALL the lost are found.

Paul describes his notorious sin as an enemy of Jesus in his years as a Pharisee, being a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. And yet, Paul saw that the grace of God overflowed for him. God's unfailing character is His unconditional love.

In Jesus' parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, the theme is of God's passion to have 'the lost' – the ones who have lost their way - return to Him. Again, the passion illustrated here is God's unconditional love for all.

The first story Jesus told was of the Lost Sheep, and the shepherd who left the 99 in order to find the one that had wandered off. It was probably distracted by some really great looking meadow over on the horizon that was greener, more level, and maybe it had a few very tasty weeds mixed in, to make it just too tempting to pass up. So the sheep made the decision to wander away from the shepherd, like a child in a toy store wanders away from the parent. So what kinds of temptations could lure a person away from the love of God?

>>The Russian author Leo Tolstoy wrote the book *A Confession*, that tells the story of his search for meaning and purpose in life.

He had rejected Christianity as a child. As a young man he drank too much, lived promiscuously, and gambled heavily. His goal in life was to become wealthy and famous. He married and had thirteen children; he appeared to have accomplished his purpose. But one question haunted him, and wouldn't let go: "Is there any meaning in my life which will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death, which awaits me?"

As he looked at the circle of people around him, he saw that they never cared about the big questions of life ("Where did I come from?" "Where am I going?" "Who am I?" "What is life all about?"). Eventually he found that the peasant people of Russia had been able to answer those questions through their Christian faith, and he realized that the answers were in Jesus.

Tolstoy had intentionally wandered away from God while he looked for sources of fulfillment, self-worth, and purpose. But then he found that the life he was living still lacked what he needed the most. God had never moved away from him; God

was always ready to bring him back. This first parable asks us to consider: What decisions have you made that have inched you over time away from God?

The second story Jesus told was of a woman looking for a Lost Coin. This story has a different theme from the first one; it is a story of separation from God through no fault of our own, not from a decision we make; but when life pulls us away from our centering place with God.

>>Ruth has enjoyed spinning classes for many years. A few years ago, a 41 year old work-at-home mom was always there when Ruth was, using a bike next to hers, and they got to become friends. Ruth noticed one week that her friend hadn't been coming for a while, and Ruth wondered, and then worried what had happened. This friend re-appeared, and shared her story with Ruth. Three months earlier she had a few days of a splitting headache. One evening while she was watching TV she felt a wave flow down her left side, and she was numb, and began to convulse. Her husband called 911. The doctors used drugs to stop the bleeding in her brain, and avoided brain surgery to repair the damage that had happened from her stroke.

She spent the next three months learning to speak again, and to use her left side again; to walk. She told Ruth about being amazed at how long it takes now to fold a towel from the clothes dryer. She walks 2 miles now most days; she marvels at the deep green of the grass, at the sound of the breeze in the branches of the trees. She feels filled with joy over the beauty that has been all around her that she never noticed before; at her children and her husband; at how great God has been to her, and she is filled with gratitude to God that she is alive.

She had been too busy before to think about God very much; but not now. The busy-ness of life had inched her away from God; and the stress of her life was probably more than her body could keep up with. But God was there. And when she was ready, God was already there to welcome her back. What about you? Has the craziness of life inched you away from God enough that you don't think of Him very much? God is still there, and ready to celebrate your return. Jesus promises that to us in these short parables.

>>There is one more 'lost' story I want to share. I am an Eagle Scout, and was very active in scouting since I was a Cub Scout. In scouting there is a recognition of honored scouts called Order of the Arrow, and it is a coveted thing to be nominated for Order of the Arrow by the other scouts in our troop. One year at Summer Camp I was asked to come to the campfire where recipients would be announced. The fire was huge and I was nervous. My name was called, and I was ordered to not speak until the next morning. I was handed a sleeping bag, no flashlight, and led through the darkness to a clearing where I was told to spend the night. I would be picked up in the morning. This was more than a little intimidating. I was not supposed to call to anyone, had no idea where I was, or

what was going to happen. I did not sleep very much that night. When I finally woke up and it was light out, I looked to my right, and a senior scout was in his sleeping bag about four feet away from me. He had been there all night. I had felt lost and alone most of the night, but even though I felt lost, I was not lost at all.

>>Our God is like the shepherd who does not wait for us to come back when we intentionally wander off, but He comes after us. Our God is like the woman who turns her home upside down to find what had become dis-connected; and reconnects with us when we have inched ourselves away from God.

Our God comes after us.

He celebrates finding us again.

He throws a heavenly party, and we know that we are home where we belong.

God's kingdom is not complete until all the lost are found.

May you and I always be aware of our Lord's presence,
and claim the gift of coming home again, no matter what.

Amen.