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Luke 15:1-10

The Sacred in the Ordinary: Sheep and Coins

Prayer of Illumination

All-knowing God, your Word is a lamp unto our feet and a light to our path. Through your Spirit: Give us eyes to spot where you are—here in this place. Give us ears that strain for your voice of encouragement. Give us minds to engage your challenge in our lives. Give us hearts of compassion, empathy, and love for all. Amen.

A few weeks ago we heard the parable of the yeast – a short parable about the abundant nature of God. This morning we consider two other short parables that reveal the character of God: what is God like, how God works, and what God expects from followers. These stories draw us into real and intimate encounters with the living God, who this morning is seen a shepherd searching for a lost sheep and a woman searching for a lost coin. As we continue to explore the sacred in the ordinary, hear these words from the Gospel of Luke chapter 15:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So Jesus 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? And 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 lost sheep.’ 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? And 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.” **This is the Word of the Lord.**

Thanks be to God.

Where do people encounter God in the Bible? If you google this question or do a search through scriptures or randomly ask 10 people – I suspect you will get answers like: in the Garden of Eden; on a mountain; in a storm; in a burning bush; in the wilderness; in some kind of crisis moment. And sometimes I think we get caught up in that thinking, thinking that we need to be on the mountain top or in the valley to find God, so much so that we fail to notice

God in the ordinary structure of life. The shepherd looking for the sheep, the woman searching for a lost coin. The conversation around the preparation of a meal; the solitude a few minutes in a parking lot before a meeting; the unexpected joy when hearing good news from an old friend.

The psychologist Abraham H. Maslow is best known for his theory on psychological health that argues we fulfill our innate human needs in priority, culminating in self-actualization. He reminds us that, “The sacred is in the ordinary...it is to be found in one's daily life, in one's neighbors, friends, and family, in one's own backyard.... To be looking elsewhere for miracles is to me a sure sign of ignorance that everything is miraculous.”¹

Our parables this morning are a testament to the ordinary. God is not a “way-out there” God, hovering over the chaos of creation; God is not in the whirlwind or a tremendous storm. God is not a heroic warrior or performing dramatic healing. Instead God is compared to a common laborer, a shepherd searching for a lost sheep and a woman searching for a lost coin. Sheep and coins. Ordinary things people can relate to.

Now you may be saying to yourself, ok I get the lost coins as the ordinary, and if I account for changes in monetary systems I can easily substitute a \$50 bill or a credit card for that. I've turned my purse and pockets, my desk, the car upside down and inside out looking for a lost credit card. But sheep... not so much. I've never lost a sheep. I've never owned a sheep. In fact when I have preached this text in the past, I have skipped the sheep parable and just focused on the lost coin because it is hard to relate to a lost sheep. A lost pet yes – but sheep are livestock – commerce- not part of the family like a pet.

However, I gained deeper appreciation of sheep after our recent vacation in Ireland, so the sheep scripture made it back into this message this morning. You see in Ireland sheep are everywhere – at least in the south and west where Brian and I traveled. They graze on the sides of the roads (especially the twisty, narrow roads we were often on); they graze in pastures, territories marked by stone fences; they graze on gently sloping hillsides and steep mountains, even on the cliffs that abut the ocean. As we explored the Dingle peninsula, we stopped at a series of beehive huts – circular stone buildings dating back over a 1000 years – often where monks lived. One of these outposts included a sheep farm – with baby lambs you could pet or hold – accompanied by signs everywhere that seemed much more American in nature than Irish – “Do Not Put Fingers in Lamb's Mouth.” As we were looking downhill toward the wild, churning Atlantic below I saw sheep grazing on terraced pastures with a fence at the bottom. I noticed one sheep that looked like it was trying to escape through a gap in the fence down the cliffs. I pointed it out to Brian and we watched that sheep climb through the gap into freedom, descending down on the cliff and disappearing from our view. We debated telling the farmer at the little petting zoo, but decided that the sheep seemed to

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/108087-the-sacred-is-in-the-ordinary-it-is-to-be-found>

know what it was doing. And the cliffs were very steep and really – what was a shepherd to do to get that sheep back that had wandered onto the cliff.

But after spending some time with this passage from Luke’s Gospel this week, I’m rethinking the going after sheep idea. After all we go to great lengths to find all kinds of things that are “lost.” When is the last time you lost, or thought you lost, your keys or your phone? And God goes to great lengths to find us when we are lost.

In her book *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, Anglican priest and writer the Rev. Tish Harrison Warren relates a story about losing her keys on a busy morning – something I think we can all relate to. She says, “I go to grab the car keys on the entry table that we bought (and painted robin’s egg blue) for the express purpose of having a spot for keys. Next to the jar of dried lavender and stack of mail are two key rings that hold the keys to the car, the house, and our neighbor’s house, as well as a couple others the purpose of which I’ve forgotten (but I keep holding on to them because you never know). Cue the sound of screeching brakes. The keys aren’t there. I check the side pocket of my bag, then the pants I wore yesterday, then my bag again. I start to panic a little. I take off my coat. I walk into my kitchen and look on the counter...”²

We’ve all been there haven’t we. She continues narrating her search by relating the emotional stages she goes through - Stages of Searching for Lost Objects:

“Stage 1. Logic. I retrace my steps. I look in the places that make sense. I breathe. I try to remain calm and rational: This is not that big of a deal. They’ll turn up.

Stage 2. Self-condemnation. As I make my way through each room...I begin to self-flagellate under my breath: ‘I am such an idiot. Where did I put those keys?’

Stage 3. Vexation. I get frustrated. I curse. Each second that passes leaves me slightly angrier. I switch back and forth between blaming myself and blaming others.

Stage 4. Desperation. I start looking everywhere, even places that don’t make sense. I’m rummaging through random drawers and looking under beds, checking the pants pocket that I’ve already checked three times, grumbling.

Stage 5. Last-ditch. I stop and pray. Okay, breathe. I tell myself that I’m being ridiculous, that I’m overreacting. Calm down. I quickly ask God for a restoration of perspective. I remember that a Catholic friend once told me to ask Saint Anthony to pray for us when we’ve lost something. So, for good measure, I murmur as I check my sock drawer, ‘Uh, Saint Anthony, not sure how this works, but if you can hear me, can you please pray for me to find my keys?’

Stage 6. Despair. I give up and plop on the couch. I will never find my keys. The cause is hopeless. I am hopeless. I will be trapped here until the end of time or until we shell out the money to replace them. Everything is worthless. The morning is ruined.”³

² Tish Harrison Warren. *Liturgy of the Ordinary*. InterVarsity Press. 2016. p.50.

³ Ibid, p51-52. Note: the text has been edited from the original for brevity.

She eventually finds her keys under the couch and remarks, “my lost keys ended up being a hiccup in the day, no big deal, a tiny, forgettable fifteen minutes. But it was also the apocalypse. *Apocalypse* literally means an unveiling or uncovering. In my anger, grumbling, self-berating, cursing, doubt, and despair, I glimpsed, for a few minutes, how tightly I cling to control and how little control I actually have. And in the absence of control, feeling stuck and stressed, those parts of me that I prefer to keep hidden were momentarily unveiled.”⁴

I can totally relate to Rev. Harrison Warren’s comments – those moments when the illusion of control is ripped from my hands and my vulnerable self is unveiled, when the attempts for perfection meet reality, and my authentic self is revealed. Yep – the moments when I recognize how profoundly lost I am and how profoundly I need God’s grace. Not just in the big scary places, but in the everyday world in which we live.

Rev. Harrison Warren relates how she spent a few months in a war-torn area of the world and was surprised to find that there, in the midst of tensions and dangers, she felt far more at peace than was she was in her average American housebound day with a baby and a toddler. She says, “I had a theology of suffering that allowed me to pay attention in crisis, to seek small flickers of mercy in profound darkness. But my theology was too big to touch a typical day in my life. I’d developed the habit of ignoring God in the midst of the daily grind.”⁵

And I find myself guilty of that as well. One of my favorite ways to procrastinate is to clean. In my research life, Brian would always know when I had big grant proposal coming due because I could be found cleaning out my sock drawer or rearranging the games in the guest bedroom closet. And it never failed that while I was cleaning I would find something I had been looking for – an earring that I had searched and searched for that had fallen into drawer; a letter that had slid behind the desk. Like the woman searching for the lost coin – I needed to shine a light in the darkness and sweep the house.

This is why I am so grateful for the Prayer of Confession each week in our Sunday service. The Prayer of Confession and Promise of the Gospel are moments of search lights and sweeping, moments of reset – moments when I can recognize my very humanness. The Prayer of Confession allows me to not just recognize, but also repent from, all the ways I am separated from God – my sins - big and small, my fears, my despair, my anger, my busyness, my inattentiveness. All the ways in which I am lost and need to be found. All the ways I need to turn away from that separation from God and turn – return – to God. That is definition of repentance – a turning – a turning from and a turning to. A turning from frantic seeking and searching for self-validation and self-salvation, and instead resting in faith and turning to the embrace from the one who is seeking me, who will keep seeking me until I am

⁴ Ibid, p52

⁵ Ibid, p55

found. And then when I am found, will rejoice. That is the Promise of the Gospel – God rejoices in the new creation I am in Christ, that we are in Christ, we all are in Christ.

As Rev. Harrison Warren says, “Repentance and faith are the constant daily rhythms of the Christian life, our breathing out and breathing in. In these small moments that reveal my lostness and brokenness, I need to develop the habit of admitting the truth of who I am - not running to justify myself or minimize my sin. And yet in my brokenness and lostness, I also need the habit of letting God love me, trusting again in his mercy and receiving again his words of forgiveness.”⁶

Repentance and faith... confession and the promise of the Gospel – they are the moments when we can open our eyes wide, shine a light around the dusty rooms of our soul, clean out the cobwebs and rest in the assurance that we have already been found. We are seen. I think about what it means to be seen – not just by God – but also by the family of faith that surround us. Often the Prayer of Confession is seen a perfunctory part of our worship service, something we have to do to be a “good Christian.” Instead, I encourage us to view it as an opportunity for a moment of clarity followed by the joy of good news. The Good News.

I also like to think the Prayer of Confession and the Promise of the Gospel in relation to the sacrament of baptism. In baptism we make promises that acknowledge that we belong to God; that God frees us from sin and death, uniting us with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. By water and the Holy Spirit, we are made members of the church, the Body of Christ, and joined to Christ’s ministry of love, peace, and justice. Through the Sacrament of baptism we enter the covenant God established in Jesus Christ. Within this covenant God gives us new life, strengthens us to resist evil, and nurtures us in love⁷. In a moment, Rebekah and I will share a litany of personal confession and communal confession from the baptismal font. A reminder that like the sheep that strayed and the coin that was lost, we will be found – we have been found – by the God who seeks us with love and mercy and grace. And friends, if we think we rejoice when we find our lost keys or phone, imagine how much God is rejoicing when we are found. Join me in prayer...

⁶ Ibid p56

⁷ This language is adapted from the Sacrament of Baptism in the *PC(USA) Book of Common Worship*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2018. p.407-409