

SERMON
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 24
September 16, 2007

Exodus 32:7-14
Psalm 51:1-10
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

One day, the Police Department in a small country town received a phone call from a worried citizen. The caller reported that he had seen the same car pass by his home five times. Now, that in itself would not have been enough to call the police. But the caller continued. The car was driving in reverse.

Police later reported that they stopped a teen-aged girl after a number of complaints that a car had been seen going around the neighborhood in reverse for some time. When the police approached the stopped vehicle, the young girl had a very logical explanation for her strange behavior.

She told the police that her parents had let her use the car, but they had changed their mind when they discovered that she had put too many miles on it. “I was just trying to unwind some of it,” she said.

As most of us have learned in life, we can’t unwind the past. We have all done things that we would rather forget. And then of course there are always people who will not let us forget. And because of that, we feel that we will never feel totally accepted. We never feel that we are good enough. In a sense we feel lost.

Perhaps some you have felt that all of your life. You’ve been living in a performance trap – having to do this thing or that thing to gain someone’s acceptance. Keith Hernandez was known as one of Major League baseball’s top players. He carried a lifetime batting average of 300 and won numerous Golden Glove awards for excellence in fielding. He won a batting championship for having the highest average. He was given the Most Valuable Player award in his league, and even the World Series.

Yet with all of his accomplishments, he missed out on something crucially important to him – his father’s acceptance and recognition that what he accomplished was valuable.

Listen to what he had to say in a very candid interview about his relationship with his father: “One day Keith asked his father, ‘Dad, I have a lifetime 300 batting average. What more do you want?’ His father replied, ‘But someday you’re going to look back and say, “I could have done more.”””

Sadly, that's the story of many people's lives: maybe yours. Your grades weren't good enough. Your job isn't good enough. Your house or car or clothes aren't good enough. You don't play good enough. You're too young, too short, too fat, too old.

Perhaps you made the brave step to seek acceptance at a church. But you still didn't feel good enough. You didn't wear the right clothes or just didn't feel like the people wanted you around.

Church people have been notorious for accepting everyone, so long as they look right, dress right, act right and think right. Of course what this really means is that if you're going to fit in here, then you need to look and act and think like we do.

In our Gospel story this morning, there were some people who really did not fit in. They were not accepted. We are told that they were sinners. They were outcasts from society.

Now there were Pharisees and Scribes who are also in the story. They were the upstanding, churchgoing citizens of the community. And they are criticizing Jesus for eating with these sinners. So Jesus tells them two stories about being lost. The first story is about a shepherd who leaves his 99 sheep to go and search for the one that is missing. The second story is about a woman searching for a coin that she had lost.

Now over the years, pastors and Sunday School teachers have applied these parables to the salvation message. Over and over again the story is told about how heaven rejoices when an unbeliever is plucked from the fire of hell.

It's kind of like we "saved" Christians are not the lost ones we hear about in these parables. Therefore WE certainly are not the ones that need to be FOUND. Rather, there are a whole group of heathens living out there in the world that we need to bring to Jesus so Jesus can save their poor souls.

Now, don't get me wrong. Jesus is definitely involved in the saving business. But Jesus is also involved in the finding business. And I think that we miss a great opportunity when we don't look at these parables in this way.

You see, if we closely examine both of these stories, they show that a legal relationship already exists between the seeker and the sought. Now this is crucial. Please hear this. The sheep already belong to the shepherd and the coin already belongs to the woman.

And guess what? We already belong to Jesus. It is in our baptism that Jesus claims us as his own. For we were marked with the cross of Christ forever.

Perhaps we can now see the relevance of these parables in our own lives. You and I are in these stories. In each case, we are the Lord's treasure. We are the ones that God will go to all extremes to bring us home – even to the point of sacrificing his own son.

You see, there are times when we as people of faith lose our way. And this losing our way is usually not a one-time deal. As a Christian pilgrim, I must admit that I have been lost a lot more than just once.

And I would guess that if you were honest with yourselves, most of you would freely admit that you also have been lost more than once.

There may be times when we stray away from God. For me, it was in my early twenties when I didn't even walk through a church door for over 5 years. I became totally self-centered instead of God centered.

There may be times when we are angry with God. There may be times when we really don't feel like worshiping God. There may be times when we don't spend much time, if any, in reading Scripture or prayer. There may even be times when we don't want anything to do with God.

But we have a God who will not let us go so easily. For God says; "I created you. I made a covenant with you. I named you and claimed you as my own. And I am going to love you with all that I am. And I will never abandon you. I will never ever give up on you."

Now if Jesus had lived in Texas, this parable of the restless God who will not allow one of his own to be lost would sound a bit different.

You see, out on the vast rangelands, individual cattle and horses inevitably stray from their herds. Therefore, ranchers have always had ways to retrieve lost animals. Today, they use aircraft and trucks. Soon, they will probably be tagging them with GPS devices. However, not long ago they employed donkeys for such work.

A healthy, well-fed donkey is smart, stubborn, and strong. And it loves nothing more than being at home. If left some distance away, a donkey will return home no matter what obstacles it faces. So to get a wandering critter back, ranchers simply tied one end of a rope to the stray, and the other end to one of their donkeys.

Then they left the pair to work things out. Sooner or later, both animals would show up at the ranch. Upon arrival, they might both look worse for wear, but they'd be home. If you would retrace their tracks, you would likely see a sequence of donkey hoof prints and a whole lot of skid marks.

So it is that God gets us back from our meanderings. He seeks us out when we stray. God's son takes the pounding, for we never make his journey easy or simple. Indeed, it costs him his life. For the rangeland that he must journey over includes the very depths of Hell itself. But he will not be stopped until each of us rests at home.

And God puts that same, persistent Spirit in each of us – and into our community of faith. He ties around our necks the same sort of harness – the yoke of discipleship that draws us along – sometimes with ease, and sometimes with a struggle.

And because we are joined to Christ, we are his witnesses to the world. We are his fellow seekers searching for a way to show compassion and mercy to the lost – to the outcasts – to those who are not acceptable in our society.

In the book, “The Whisper Test,” Mary Ann Bird told the following story. She wrote: “I grew up knowing that I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate. And when I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I looked to others: a little girl with a mis-shapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech.

When classmates asked, ‘What happened to your lip?’ I’d tell them that I had fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside of my family could love me.

There was, however, a teacher in the second grade whom we all adored – Mrs. Leonard was her name. She was short, round, happy – a sparkling lady. Every year we had a hearing test. Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class. Finally, it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something, and we would have to repeat it back. She would whisper things like, ‘The sky is blue,’ or ‘Do you have new shoes?’

I listened intently to hear the words from Mrs. Leonard. It must have been God that put those words into her mouth, for those seven words changed my life forever. Mrs. Leonard said, in her whisper, ‘I wish you were my little girl.’”

These are the words of our Lord. I wish you were mine. And so it is. For the one who seeks us so desperately does not let us continue on our solo path. But rather, brings us back to the flock – puts us back in the drawer – places us back into the world where we are so badly needed. And this is where we belong.

This is where the Spirit of God will arise within us. This is where we will hear the angels in heaven rejoicing.

For as we say at the conclusion of our worship; “Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are claimed, gathered and sent for the sake of the world. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.