

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
1 Timothy 1:12-17; Psalm 14; Luke 15:1-10  
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I had just gotten my haircut late in the afternoon before going home for dinner. It was getting dark as I turned onto our street. Since I was on my scooter, I decided to take off my helmet and let the rushing air dry my moistened hair. As I brushed my left hand through my locks to expose every fiber, I faintly heard a ping behind me. I stopped as quickly as I could, fearing that my wedding ring may have slipped off my finger. Sure enough, it was gone.

I searched using the headlights from my scooter, just hoping it had come to rest in the middle of the street where it could be quickly and easily recovered. But after thirty minutes, no such luck.

I drove the short way to our house, parked the scooter and retrieved our brightest flashlight to scour every square inch of the road, even along the curbs, which were littered with weeds, dead leaves, sand and trash.

Fortunately, I believed I had heard the ping over my left shoulder so I concentrated on that side of the road. After another hour of carefully lifting every brown leaf and sifting through cigarette butts and tufts of grass, I found it. You can imagine my joy as I skipped and leapt and sang out, "Thank you, Jesus!" on the short jog to our home. I bound into the house to tell Juanita of my good fortune.

I'm sure I've prompted you to think about your own lost and hopefully found experiences. The concept covers so much terrain in our lives from lost golf balls, to getting lost in the woods or an unfamiliar city, to lost memories and other irreplaceable losses, such as people or our health. On the anniversary of 9-11, we saw again footage of workers carefully searching through the rubble after the twin towers fell.

On a lighter note, a state trooper found a Yuppie by the roadside next to his mangled car. The Yuppie was wailing, "My BMW! I've lost my BMW!" The trooper said, "Never mind that, you've lost your left arm!" The Yuppie looked at his severed arm and cried, "My Rolex! I've lost my Rolex!"

In this morning's lesson from Luke, we heard two stories Jesus told about things that were lost and found – a sheep and a coin. Both are in response to the grumbling, displeasure and criticism of a group of strict, law-abiding religious, who don't think Jesus should be associating with some low life tax collectors and sinners. They stridently kept their distance from such riffraff so as not to contaminate themselves or jeopardize their pure relationship with God. For the Pharisees, these lost souls have made their own beds and now must sleep in them. Good riddance.

In the first of Jesus' stories, a shepherd leaves 99 sheep in the wilderness to search for one who wandered off from the herd. Most of us might consider a 1 percent loss acceptable – collateral damage, margin of error, planned waste, lost productivity or spoilage.

The shepherd, however, knew the sheep. He called them each by name. The loss of even one was inconceivable if there was a chance of restoration. Without a rescue attempt, not only would the one suffer a tragic fate, but the 99 would be left incomplete as well.

One of the lessons of globalization we're learning, but not fully realizing yet, is that everyone benefits when everyone benefits. We know too well how economies across the globe impact one another. The U.S. economy is stronger when European and Asian economies are stronger. It's in our best interest to promote the interests of everyone.

We might call that a Kingdom goal. These parables and Jesus use of them are to show us what makes God happy. God and the angels in heaven rejoice when a sinner repents, when someone who's been lost is found, when the circle goes unbroken, divisions end, everyone is safely gathered in.

The Kingdom of God won't be realized as long as anyone is left out, left behind or refuses to enter it.

Some of you know I have a younger brother, Jim, a painter, who now lives in France. We're very close. Jim has been a Christian most his life, even an Episcopalian for a while. More recently, however, he's been a practicing Buddhist because he said it became too hard to believe in God. Presently, Jim is in Ireland for a month as an artist in residence.

Thursday I got an email from him describing the coast of Ireland as a very tough landscape, barren, fierce and rugged. He wrote, "No wonder it's such a spiritual place!" Then he added, much to my surprise and delight, "I've been tempted to find God again, too..."

I responded immediately, "Maybe God is looking for you." And in parenthesis I added, "Actually I believe God has never stopped looking for you."

Saint Paul, writing to Timothy, sums it up pretty well when he writes, "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..." Whether you consider yourself a sinner or not, Jesus came to unite us with himself and the God he called Father. In this way, we gain the Kingdom, which is both partially present reality and full-blown future reality.

Listen again to the prayers we recite together after communion each Sunday, "Eternal God, heavenly father, you have graciously accepted us as living members of your Son...."

And in another form, "Almighty and living God, we thank you...for assuring us...that we are living members of your Son and heirs of your eternal kingdom."

We might weep with joy every time we consider the implication of God's offer to us to be living members of the divine Son and heirs of God's holy realm.

Truly there can't be anything better, can there?

The emphasis of the second parable seems to me to be on the effort the woman expends to find her lost coin. She sweeps and searches by oil lamp to signify she won't sleep until she succeeds.

Isn't it good to know, though we may give up on God, God won't give up on us. On this Rally Sunday, some have come back after a summer break. O joy! You're back; our family is richer and fuller once more.

Like God and the angels in heaven, may we be a joyful people at the sight of new and familiar faces on Sunday mornings. May we not just wait for people to come to us but actively invite friend and stranger to join us in the hope that perhaps they, too, will gain greater life as we have.

God's joy will not be complete 'til all God's children find a place in the band. Let's do our part to swell the ranks at Christ and Grace. Amen.