

Worship Service “*Lost and Found*”

Pentecost 14, Year C, 11th September, 2022

1 Timothy 1:12-17 NRSV / Luke 15:1-10 NRSV

Prelude

Welcome Guests / Announcements

Gospel Tribute (Video) *Center of My Joy* Pastor Patrinell Wright and
the Total Gospel Choir,

written by Gloria Gaither, Richard Smallwood, William J. Gaither,
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Pass the Peace

Opening Hymn *Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise* **70**

Call to Worship

God calls to the lost, the least, and all who long for home; God calls when we wander from the path chosen for us and waste the gifts we have been given. God calls and welcomes us back to worship this day; let us celebrate and rejoice in God’s presence forever; let us worship God together.

Invocation

Thank you, O Holy One for this opportunity to meet you in this place of worship. We come to this new day after a long week, carrying all kinds of feelings, emotions and expectations. But here, in your presence let your Holy Spirit move us to a place of rejoicing in which new hopes abound. We will celebrate the gift of your caring Spirit. Amen.

Epistle Reading: **1 Timothy 1:12-17 NRSV**

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service,
even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,
and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.

But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.

To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

A Time of Prayer

Joys and Concerns

Hymn

Healer of Our Every Ill

377

Pastoral Prayer

Let us implore the Lord our God praying, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”

We pray for leaders of the Church. May they serve as examples to those who would come to believe in Christ for eternal life. May the Church place its hope in you, O God, and not in human wisdom.

We pray for the leaders of the nations. May they show mercy and advocate for the rights of the people. May they, like Moses, seek the greater good rather than their own interests.

We thank you for all you created. We thank you that your Son Jesus Christ rejoiced in your creation—telling stories about sheep, praying in the wilderness and walking on the sea. May we also appreciate the works of your hands.

We pray for the people in our lives. May we learn to love the stiff-necked, the sinners and all those in great need of your mercy. Make us instruments of your peace.

We pray for the sick, the anxious and the sorrowful. Make them hear of joy and gladness, that broken bodies and broken spirits may rejoice.

We trust to your mercy, O God, all who have died. May they rest eternally in your peace. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, our God, be honor and glory forever and ever.

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

Gospel Lesson: Luke 15:1-10 NRSV

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 he 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?

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 sheep that was lost.’

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?

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.”

Message – *Lost and Found*

We’ve all had the experience of losing something. Something you've misplaced, and spent minutes, hours, or days looking for, until it finally shows up. Whether it’s that piece of jewelry left to us by a beloved family member, or that piece of paper with the information we now need to reference that has become elusive and outside our grasp. We all know the frustration of looking and looking, but not finding it anywhere.

My particular favorite is when I am sure I put it “somewhere I wouldn’t lose it” but have no idea where that “somewhere” is when the time comes. We know the frustration well, as well as the joy and relief when we finally do locate it. Much worse though, is when we misplace a person. Many of us, particularly the parents among us, probably know all too well the sense of panic when a child disappears in that moment we divert our attention for just a second.

I used to take my goddaughters to the beach each year, and I’ll never forget one of the first years, when Kylie was probably six or seven, seeing her playing in the sand down by the edge of the water. I turned to talk to her older sister, and when I looked back, she was gone. Fortunately, in her course of play, she had just wandered up the beach out of view, but both of us were panicked and terrified when she became lost and separated from us. We both

felt joy when we finally found each other, with tears streaming down her face from being scared. Losing something, especially something important to us, or losing someone, can be frustrating, scary and exasperating. Yet the relief and joy we feel when we locate what was lost is rewarding on its own.

That's the message on the surface we get from Jesus this week as he shares two parables in our gospel lesson this morning. We have two stories of something being lost, searched for and found, followed by joyous celebration. While we may rejoice when we find that wayward item or person, how often do we actively celebrate? Yet that's what both our protagonists do in our parables today. But like all parables, we have some twists in the plot to examine.

Jesus shares these stories in response to "grumblings" from the Pharisees that are in the crowd around him. They are grumbling that not only does he welcome "sinners," he actually seeks them out to dine with, to share table fellowship with. We often think of the Pharisees as the bad guys in many of the gospel stories, but these were men that Jesus did not always shun or avoid. He also ate with them from time to time. They were interested in what he had to say, and sometimes warned him of dangerous situations he was headed for at the hands of the priests and Sadducees. They were the scholars of the religious arena in ancient Palestine, the seminary professors of the day, the experts in interpreting the law. However, in their efforts to translate the 600 odd laws of the Torah into practical do's and don'ts for the common folk, they also created categories of those who were clean or pure, and those who were unclean, or sinners. Their conception of sin was quite different from ours. A "sinner" to them was anyone who was not Jewish, who did not follow their interpretation of all 617 Torah laws to the letter. So if any of you wear cotton/polyester blends, eat shellfish, catfish or pig products, have ever touched a football, please see me after the service and we'll discuss your sinful ways. In order to stay pure, one had to keep oneself insulated from those who were deemed to be sinners and unclean.

One possible Hebrew root word for the term Pharisee is actually the verb for "to separate." They can't understand how a teacher, a rabbi like Jesus, could possibly set such a bad example by intentionally defiling himself by mixing with these "sinners." Yet that's exactly what Jesus seems to go out of his way to do. Which begs the question, why? Why intentionally risk the ire of the religious elite of his day to share the company of society's outcasts.

It comes down to perspective. Their perspective was to keep the bad apples out, in order that they didn't tarnish the good apples. His perspective was to make all the apples good apples, so none would be discarded. He knew the joy of finding the lost, of seeing the value in each person. He welcomed them into his company the same as he would welcome the most notable figure, perhaps even more so.

In the parable of the lost sheep, he makes a pretty radical statement. The shepherd abandons the 99 sheep to seek after the one who was lost. Upon finding that sheep, he literally carries it to safety. The joy in finding that sheep that was lost was so great he

hosted a celebration to recognize the relief and elation he felt. Yet it could be considered problematic that he left the 99 to the dangers of the wild, exposed to injury and predators and the many other dangers faced there. If we take a close look at the story, we are never told that the shepherd ever returns to those pious sheep. He returns home with the lost sheep to party. We're never told the fate of the 99.

Considering that his primary audience for these parables is the grumbling Pharisees, there are clear possible implications for them. In their pious determination of who's in and who's out, perhaps they themselves aren't so secure in their own salvation. Perhaps the one sheep is not really the lost one. Maybe it's the 99 who need found, or need to find their way back to salvation.

Now I also don't want to overly minimize this conception of the term "sinner." There were certainly those around the table with Jesus who had gone astray, had made bad decisions in their life. Tax collectors who cheated and defrauded others. Romans who profited by the oppression of others. The difference between Jesus and the Pharisees is that making a wrong choice doesn't exclude you from the table. Being "damaged goods", being outcast actually assures your seat at the table. All 100 sheep made bad choices I'm sure, it's just the 99's choices didn't cost them their place in society or their place at society's table.

So are we more like the one or the 99? Do we have a preference who comes through those doors or sits in the pew next to us? Would we prefer nice young couples more like us or those who are outcast like the one who got lost and needed to be found?

I'd like to close today with a little story a friend from my home church shared on Facebook his week. The pastor says they sit front and center. The gay boys. Sometimes they hold hands. And some folks have said he should address the issue. But the pastor tells me he doesn't know what to say. And then there's the man who sneaks in the back door. Fresh off the street. After the service starts. And leaves before benediction. The people sitting close complain about how bad he smells. Of beer and smoke and sweat. But the pastor tells me he doesn't know what to say. And then there's the young mama who wears dirty skin and lets her four children come in and eat all the donuts and drink all the watered-down juice. Some church staff say they "...eat like little pigs. Like they haven't eaten in weeks." While the mama just stands there and lets them. And the elders say something must be done and said. But the pastor tells me he doesn't know what to say. And there's that woman sitting among the faithful. And everybody knows her. She sits with a painted-up face, cheap perfume, and a broken heart. And those who sit close, well, they all treat her for what they think she is. And at the last staff meeting, her name came up. Something must be done about her. But the pastor tells me he doesn't know what to say.

The pastor is a good man. Holy and just. And he wants to do the "right and loving" thing. And he wants to "look like Jesus". And he asks me if I have any thoughts on anything he could say. Yes, sweet Pastor. I do. Start with this and say it Louder than any other words: "Welcome to Church. This is a place of love and hope and safety and forgiveness. We will be food for the hungry. Living water for the thirsty. We are so glad you are here. You are

invited. You are loved. Come on in—we've been waiting on you. Welcome here. We are the church." Say that. To the called and to the called-out. To the leaders and the greeters. To the dirty and the clean. We are all the same. We are. May we blow the dust of religion out of our souls and choose affection instead. May our words and actions and reactions be a sanctuary for all. Jesus broke many laws to love. So, Jesus, be our voice. Be the only words we should ever speak.

Is that who we are?

Do we seek those who are really lost, or hope we only find those who are a good fit? Let's be truly honest with ourselves and really reflect if we are being the shepherds we are called to be, seeking and welcoming the lost sheep in the wilderness around us. What do we really feel inside, not the smiling friendly face we wear for everyone to see.? Or do we still harbor feelings and attitudes like the 99 that the shepherd abandons?

Today and in the coming week, I hope we can spend some time thinking about how we really feel, and how we can make efforts to become more the church that truly is a place of refuge and respite for all those lost sheep in the wilderness of our world. Amen.

A Call to Serve

Like Paul, who was showered with an abundance of mercy from God, we too have been blessed. Like Paul, we are called to go forth and tell our story of Christ in our lives so that others may also be inspired. One of the ways in which we tell the story is through the giving of gifts to God. In our gift-giving we participate with God in providing for the needs of God's **people**.

A Time for Reflection - Musical Interlude

The Prayer of Thanksgiving

May our gifts become symbols of our intention to minister with God to satisfy the needs of those whom God loves.

Hymn

In Christ there is no East or West

306

BENEDICTION

We have been found by our God, so now we will go to search for those forgotten by the world. We have been welcomed by Jesus, so now we will go to embrace the ones people look down their noses at. We have been gathered as a community by the Spirit, so now we will go to be a family to the people who long to draw near to hope.

Postlude