

Sermon – Year C – Proper 19
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, Washington

Why was Jesus spending so much time with low lives? Tax collectors and sinners gathered around this itinerant preacher who was teaching about the kingdom of God. He ate with them, he even hosted them. He accepted them. The Pharisees and scribes, religious leaders of the day, grumbled increasingly over relationships they deemed inappropriate.

Jesus answered with two stories about lost things. His stories were signs – signs of the nature and character of God. Surprise, extravagance, joy. God is a god of surprises. God is a god of extravagant love. God is a god who rejoices in our union with the divine reality and purpose. Surprise, extravagance, joy.

God of surprises. The first surprise for the religious leaders is that Jesus' two seekers, a shepherd and a woman, represent people on the margins of society. Tending sheep was an occupation avoided by observant Jews. It was the work of a lower social class than a scribe. Both the shepherd and the woman are images for God.

Jesus addressed the scribes and Pharisees by saying "which of you" as if they were shepherds or (God forbid) women. His stories thrust them out of their world and into a world in which their value has been distorted and reduced. What a shock!

It would be as if I turned to the Eucharistic ministers or the ushers and said "which of you homeless people, having lost your grocery cart with all your possessions..... is willing to go to the homeless camp and search for your lost cart?"

Comparing God to a woman shocked and surprised the audience. The comparison challenged their fundamental image of God. A woman searching for a lost coin as metaphor for God's searching love turned their religious organization of the world upside down. The hearers were challenged to think in a new way about the nature of God and about God's relationship to sinners and outcasts. Jesus said God seeks the sinner, the outcast, and rejoices more over finding the lost than over the presence of the righteous.

Are we who behave so decently and even-tempered the righteous - or are we not all sinners and lost from time to time? Are we not sometimes like sheep wandering all over the mountains?

There are lots of ways to be lost. Who among us has not felt lost from God at some point? Sometimes we wandered away from the practice of our religion. Sometimes we lost an important relationship, fell out with a beloved person and despaired of ever restoring that friendship again. Or we made one little decision – perhaps out of curiosity, perhaps out of anger, perhaps out of thoughtlessness - and unintended consequences moved us farther and farther until finally we felt we lost our true selves. Who among us has not been homeless, from time to time, lost from our home in God. Many of us know what it is like to feel outcast from society. Often we do not know how lost we are! And there are many people in our 21st century Western culture who do not know God. Speaking through Jeremiah, God says "My people are foolish, they do not know me."

That lost sheep didn't mean to misbehave. It just wandered away a few steps at a time. A tall tuft of fresh green grass beckoned. A bit of fresh dew on a leaf had to be licked. An interesting patch of green had to be explored. Before anyone noticed, the sheep was lost. Did he know he was lost? We often don't know when we have wandered away from God. The shepherd, looking

over his flock, had a strange feeling. He decided to count them. One sheep was missing. He put his hand to his eye, searching. He found nothing. Maybe the sheep was hidden behind a tall rock, or a clump of tall shrubs. The shepherd decided he MUST leave his flock to search of the missing sheep. This was serious. His entire livelihood was contained in the flock: they provided food, clothing, goods for trade. It was a big risk: he had to count on the flock staying together until he returned. He hunted and searched until he found the lost sheep was found and the shepherd returned in joy to the flock with the sheep laid over his shoulders.

The woman's coin fell out of the little bag tied at her waist. It must have rolled away, across the dirt floor – maybe out of the house, maybe under a wooden box holding bedding – maybe even into the cooking fire. She hunted, she sought, she lit a lamp and she swept her house.

God of extravagance. The woman and shepherd searched extravagantly for the lost. She sought with great urgency. He was reckless, leaving his flock unattended.

When she found the coin, the woman was so happy she called all her neighbors to come rejoice with her. The shepherd rejoiced when he found his lost sheep and he too invited friends and neighbors to rejoice with him. "Rejoice with me. Rejoice with me" they said. The story repeats the words "joy" and "rejoicing" five times. Sounds like a party!

Jesus was telling pious people of God's concern and compassion for the lost. He told them God searches with great urgency for the lost and the outcast. And finally, Jesus told the religious leaders God's joyous celebrates with great joy when the lost are restored. There is joy in heaven, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

This Sunday and every Sunday we celebrate Holy Com-munion, a joyous union with God. We call it Eucharist, meaning thanks, because we are thankful for the divine energy seeking us when we are lost, restoring us when we fall away, patient with us when we fail to trust in the abiding presence of the Good Shepherd. Communion is a festive time, our party with our God.

The Kingdom of God is here, is unfolding in the present and living toward the future. In God's realm, each and all is created in love, lives in the love and has the power to increase the love.

Each and every one of us is loved by God. Each and every one of us is valued by God. Each and every one of us is needed to complete the kingdom of God. We can do more and we can do it better as a community. We can have a bigger impact. As we live in Christ as the church of Saint Barnabas, let us never lose sight of the value of each and every member, of the value of respecting one another, of the value of mutual service to each and all, and of the importance of trusting the God who made us, who loves us and who looks after us.

In the name of God, we must also seek others who are lost. There are lost friends, lost children, lost worshippers and lost strangers. We must seek the missing, the lost, those who say "there is no God." Our mission statement says we are all about being reconcilers of people to one another and to the God and Father of Jesus Christ. If we really live in the divine realm, we will search with urgency to find the lost. We will surprise ourselves by loving the unloved, the lost, and the marginalized.

God the Good Shepherd continuously seeks us, continuously reaches out to us. God our Mother is always sweeping away the dust until everyone can be seen and restored to the community – a coin returned to the crocheted wool pocket around her waist. Every coin is needed; every coin is valued. Surprise! Extravagance! Joy!

Surprise: God comes to us as poor, humble, outcast. Extravagant: God's love and desire for each and all is abundant, extravagant. Joy: God rejoices whenever the lost is restored, whenever the lost is reconciled to the God of each and all