



Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick

14th Sunday After Pentecost, September 15, 2019

Sermon Title: "Never Lost to God"

Gospel Text: Luke 15:1-10

Offentimes here at Grace I park my car back at the corner of our lot by the preschool playground, which in the mornings is an area bubbling with activity. Parents and kids jostling along, talking about their item for show and tell, or new backpacks. And there is a bench there where shoes get re-tied and things get sorted. Lots of energy and joy. The rest of the time this bench is often home to other folks. Like the new student taking a selfie and talking to mom back home halfway round the world, or calling home, from the "privacy" of the bench, not a dorm room- homesick. Or someone is waiting for a friend, who is late in arriving. Sometimes it is a couple discussing their relationship, sometimes tearfully. Sometimes a person with their head in their hands. These moments are where doubts and anxieties show up. Can I make it here? Will someone love me here? Where do I go from here? Am I alone-here?

Lost.

It's in our very human nature to be wired for relationships.

Being lost or being "outside" are things we all dread.

Outside the preschool playground on the sidewalk these days there are painted rocks- in vibrant colors and hopeful messages on them- "You are beautiful!" "Have fun!" I looked the other day for my favorite, and I am not at all surprised that it is gone. It says "YOU MATTER." When I told someone my favorite rock was gone, they told me they were sorry I'd lost my rock. But I am not. Knowing what I know about that bench and what happens there, I am so happy that rock was found because I bet someone probably really needed to hear- YOU MATTER.

Jesus knew that. It's why in the face of those who were looking down their noses at others for not meeting standards, he tells stories.

And knowing that we do best if we are led into it, he talks about a lost sheep and lost money.

Just beyond today's gospel he will close the loop on criticism and exclusion and remind those then and us, these stories are about people.

The judgmentalism at the beginning of the gospel is- "Why is Jesus busy focusing upon THEM- those sinners, those unworthy, those losers?" Why?

Because we should never be comfortable with "some are just lost."

And in God's eyes and heart, no one will be.

No matter what it looks like in the world around us.

This message matters so much, for so many reasons for all of us. I want to dwell for a moment in a hard one. Because I lost someone dear to me, whose death was by suicide. Just saying that word fractures me, but it is ok to talk about it. This month is Suicide Prevention and Awareness month and the Lutheran Suicide Prevention Ministry encourages pastors to have the nerve to speak. Because 490 ELCA members in 2017 is a lot of loss.* And I confess I paused and didn't want to speak-because this is hard, and awkward and a struggle. But then I remembered that if I take that path, the very things that pain me are repeated.

I struggled with how someone I cared about felt so lost, and I felt so powerless. And I committed my life to making sure no one felt so lost at least as far as I could help it. God took me at my word-since my ordination eight years ago this week, not one month goes by without a conversation about such struggles. I have also struggled with how people in Christ's church respond to survivors of suicide. Asking unhelpfully whether we saw or knew anything that was a clue-as if we haven't already asked that ourselves incessantly. Or telling me how awful this is- not to comfort me, but instead to pass judgment and consign my person to those who are beyond salvation for having "committed the unforgivable." Words like that make those who are grieving such a loss become lost because no one joins us in our grief. So I have also made it my calling to call "no more" on such words of separation because they are just not true.

Later today we will rejoice in a baptism and promise to raise up a new child of God. And we hope for a lifetime of joy, but here at Grace I give thanks and believe we share God's good news that no one is lost to God no matter what your journey. And I rejoice that we want our youth (and anyone) to know that if you are struggling or you know someone who is, we are here. And we will do the hard and necessary work of sitting with you wherever you are, and loving you. Our partnering with the Jana Marie Foundation to educate about suicide prevention supports this vital mission, as one more way to love one another. I thank God, our denomination, the ELCA, gave us a \$10,000 grant to share this holy work.

Friends, remember, no one is ever lost to God. There is no table of people with whom Jesus will not sit. In fact, Jesus tells us the opposite. There is rejoicing when anyone who was lost is found. And the really beautiful thing is that God is the finder.

Not only that, God is playing "Finders Keepers."

Like that shepherd, God will search high and low. Like the woman, God will look in every nook and cranny and tolerate sifting through a lot of mess to find us. And like the father of the lost son, God doesn't wait for us to sufficiently change, or sufficiently confess, or sufficiently restore ourselves. God doesn't wait for us to cool down, or stop being difficult. God is like the father who glimpses the lost one far off, and breaks out in an all-out dash faster than a Penn State running back, to make the score of restoring a lost connection. That's how much every one is loved.

God can't wait to meet us wherever we feel lost. And sometimes in many ways, we all are. No one is alone in that.

And, if, for whatever reason, in this earthly life, a person misses that connection, I believe that the heart of my God will not rest with allowing "lost" to be the final word. In love and mercy God gathers us still- always.

Because you see, in God's eyes, the picture is simply incomplete without each and every one, and nothing can separate us from that love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If you have known loss, know God is here.

If you are struggling, God has not left.

We are here to remind one another-

God's will is to find and to restore and to rejoice over us.

When you have the chance to draw someone close so they can experience being found, do one small thing-a smile, a hug, a phone call, maybe even paint a rock.

But never tire of sharing the life giving good news that Jesus loves us all and will stop at nothing to make sure he brings us all home.

*490 people is the number of ELCA members statistically based upon the size of our denomination and extrapolating the total number of suicides in our country in 2017.