

Year C 14th Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

Psalm 14

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

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Many of us today are grieving, struggling with a range of feelings that can seem at times overwhelming. We have unanswered and even unanswerable questions that we wrestle with. At times we might even feel lost in our grief. It is no coincidence that the Scriptures for today are about God's love and concern for the lost. Jesus came so that we might know without a shadow of a doubt just how much God cares for the lost. The whole story of Scripture is the story of the Lord calling back to himself His lost people, and doing for them in Jesus Christ what they were not capable of doing for themselves.

Jesus said, I came to seek and save the lost. Jesus came to bring those who had lost their way back to the loving embrace of their Heavenly Father. That category includes everyone before they have known God's redeeming grace and mercy in their lives through Jesus Christ. The lost are not just the bad people out there or those who don't know the Lord. There are times when all of us struggle, when all of us feel lost or feel far away from God. Scripture tells us, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." None of us is without sin so no one is exempt when Jesus is talking about his love and concern for the lost. He is talking about those far from the Lord but he is also talking about you and about me. It is by the grace of God that we have been redeemed by Jesus Christ and by the grace of God that

we continue to walk with him in faithfulness.

We like to think of other people when we think of the lost or those who really need to hear a particular word from the Lord. Have you ever done that when you are listening to a sermon? Oh so and so really needs to hear this. I have often caught myself doing that and had to remind myself to listen for myself. We can see so easily the faults and sins of others but we turn a blind eye to those ways that we are lost- those places we have kept closed off from the Lord. The religious elite of Jesus' time were convinced of their own righteousness and acutely aware of where they considered others to be falling short of God's law. They accused Jesus of associating with evil tax collectors and notorious sinners assuming that he was guilty by association, otherwise why would he have anything to do with them? Rather than pointing out the sins of the religious elite or arguing with them about the state of the souls of those in the crowd, Jesus told three parables illustrating God's love and compassion for the lost: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. The first two are part of our gospel reading for today.

Jesus often used the image of a shepherd to describe God's love and care for his people. A shepherd was constantly vigilant, for all it took was a moment of letting down your guard for the vulnerable sheep to come under attack or go wandering off on

their own and find trouble. We are not so different. We need to guard our hearts and minds by keeping them close to the Good Shepherd and by remembering that he cares for us, is with us, and calls us to trust Him and to follow Him. God's love for us is so great that he will leave the 99 to go after the one that is lost until that sheep is returned to the safety of the Shepherd's care.

The second parable was about the lost coin- lost right in God's own household. But the fact that it was lost did not impact its value. The Lord tirelessly searched for it until it was found even sending his own Son to die on our behalf to redeem and restore us to himself rather than simply write it off as lost.

Sometimes when we talk about the lost we talk about those who don't know the Lord. But I am sure we all know and love some who have known Jesus and then lost their way, fallen away from their faith or from living in the truth of God's love for them in their lives. Perhaps we ourselves have had times when God feels very distant and we feel vulnerable and alone, even lost. All it takes is a dark night of the soul where we allow thoughts that are contrary to the truth about who we are to God to stick around and grow. We need to know in those times that the Lord is right there with us, waiting for us to call out to him and allow Him to carry us back to that place of knowing His loving presence once again. We as the community of believers who know and love the Lord are meant to demonstrate that loving presence, to speak the truth of God's love and promises for us to one another, and to be that safe place where we can share with one another our sense of feeling lost and help one another to find our way back to safety.

There is no place we can go where we can hide from the Lord and not be found by Him. There is no struggle we face that he isn't aware of, no hole we have wedged ourselves into (look online- sheep really do this) that God can't find a way to get us out of if we trust Him to help us and allow Him to do the work in us one day at a time, one moment at a time. God loves us that much that he won't give up on us no matter how lost we have become.

In our baptism service, we anoint the newly baptized with oil that has been blessed for this purpose saying, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever." There is no asterisk after that statement listing exceptions to the rule. Once you are baptized you are the Lord's. It's not that you are the Lord's until you really make a mess of things or until you move away from the Lord. Forever is forever. Once when I was a priest in Connecticut, someone called the church wanting to have their name taken out of the church register of baptisms. Sadly they had joined a cult and had been told they needed to be unbaptized. But you can't undo what God has done. Thankfully we can't undo the fact that you belong to Christ. We can't rewrite history.

However, the death of Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins pays the price for our redemption, wiping us clean of sins past present and future, making it just as if we had never sinned. We are justified by grace through Jesus Christ. It's the gift of our God who loves and saves the lost and will stop at nothing to bring us back to him.

Jesus calls us to the way of truth, unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace. Our hope is not in what we can do in and for ourselves but what God can accomplish in and through us. Jesus reveals to us something about God that was not

understood by the religious elite of the time or by the self-righteous of our time. God is not interested in the form of our religion or the facade we project to the world, He wants our heart to be His. And through the work of the Holy Spirit in us he shapes our heart to be like his own. It's through that day to day moment by moment relationship with the Lord of life and light that gradually makes His love more fully known to us, reminds us of His promises for us, and the hope that we have for the future because we know our lives are in God's hands. He restores us to wholeness, heals those inner wounds, strengthens us to stand strong against the attacks of the enemy that comes from so many unexpected places, and speaks truth against the lies that threaten to derail us.

I can remember as a child lying in bed at night, familiar objects took on whole new identity in the darkness. A chair with clothing hanging on it could become a monster lurking in the corner ready to jump out and get me. If I turned on the light- which usually involved drumming up the courage to get out of the safety of my bed and dash across the room to the light switch- I would see it was only a chair with clothes on it. But in the shadows of the darkness where the truth was hidden, my imagination would play on my fears and vulnerability. It was only in the light that the truth was revealed. Even as an adult all it took was watching a horror movie to reintroduce those fears that would play on my imagination in the darkness and create a danger that wasn't real.

Shame and guilt do the same things in our minds. They fabricate fault and blame where none should exist and burdening us with a burden we are not meant to bear. They reframe pictures in our mind so that what we know to be the truth is

misrepresented. They wear away our confidence, play on our fears and vulnerability, and distort our self-image. Jesus leads us to know the truth, reminds us of who we are in Him and of His promises for us.

Hebrews 4:12 says, "God's Word is living and active and sharper than any two edged sword." It penetrates to the very heart of whatever we are struggling with and cuts through any lies that are attempting to take up residence in our mind. Jesus said in John 8:32 "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." How do we know the truth? By abiding in his Word- not the Word misused and taken out of context but the Word of God taken in the context of the whole witness of Scripture. The Lord speaks truth against the lies that have held us captive, and helps us to see ourselves as the beloved child of God He created us to be, filled with all the gifts and potential we need to live into the fullness of life that is ours in the Lord

Jesus says in John 8:16, "If the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed." But Jesus comes where we invite him to come. We need to open the door to invite the Lord to fill every part of us with His light, to infuse every part of us with His Holy Spirit, even those hidden things that are known only to ourselves.

Communication is the key to any healthy relationship, and, in addition to reading God's Word, Prayer is the way we remain in constant communication with God. It's the way we stay close to the Good Shepherd. It doesn't have to mean we live our lives on our knees. It is an attitude and focus of our heart and mind that is keeping the communication lines with God always open as we learn to be constantly seeking to follow God's will and listen for that still small voice when the Holy Spirit says "This

is the way, walk in it.” We can identify God’s voice because it is consistent with His Word and with the teachings of Jesus. In her book, Angels; Devotions and Art to Encourage, Refresh, and Inspire, Anne Neilson gives an acronym for prayer that helps direct and strengthen our prayer practice.

Position yourself: This is not about your physical position so much as your spiritual position. Do you have a relationship with Jesus? Have you surrendered your life to Him and asked Him to be your Savior and your Lord? If you’re not sure, open your prayer book to the Baptismal vows on pages 302- 305 and walk yourself through them again or go through them with a trusted friend.

Repent: Turn from anything not in line with God’s Word- anything that would pull us away from life and light, from the love of Jesus that fills us and sets us free.

Acknowledge that God is sovereign. He is always with us, he knows our innermost thoughts. Nothing is hidden from Him and yet he loves us still with an everlasting love.

Yield to the Holy Spirit. God gave us an incredible gift of fullness of life in the Holy Spirit. Quiet yourself from the noise of the world and hush the competing thoughts in your head to hear God’s voice and to breathe in His life giving, healing Holy Spirit. If you are too overwhelmed, start by listening to hymns or songs of praise to God to help quiet and focus you on the Lord.

Encourage: Build one another up through prayer and be praying for others. I would add encourage one another. Sometimes we need to be reminded we are loved in Christ by other people too. We need to have the truth of God’s love for us spoken over us from the community of faith as well as just reading it for ourselves in God’s Word.

Rejoice: This feels like a tall order today. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 tells us to “rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in (not for) all circumstances.” When rejoicing feels like too much of a reach we can work with thanksgiving and gratitude even if at the moment all you can think of to be grateful for is that we are not suffering alone. God is with us and he has redeemed us by grace through Jesus Christ. We can be thankful for the community of faith that is here to carry the burden with us if we will let them. When we start with gratitude and thanksgiving, the Lord will eventually lead us back to rejoicing as we experience His healing, redeeming love.

We were never intended to walk alone. We were created to be in loving relationship with God. That is where we find life and light and hope. In Jesus there is always hope. Our God of infinite creativity and perfect knowledge always knows what we need to get us back to living the fullness of life that we have in Him. Nothing is too hard for God.

Amen.