

Year C, September 15, 2019  
14 Pentecost (Proper 19)  
Christ Church, Mexia

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

According to William Barkley the source of today's gospel reading, Ch 15 of Luke, is often called "the gospel in the gospel, ... as if it contained the very distilled essence of the good news which Jesus came to tell."

Jesus, of course, was speaking to people of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE (or AD, if you haven't adjusted yet to the new designations) and that's why he chose to make his points with these parables. His audience could fully appreciate the difficult job of the shepherd and his dedication to it. Often the shepherd was tending a communal flock, the sheep of the village – not just his few alone. Pastureland and water were scarce, the surrounding countryside and that along the way to and from them was harsh - filled with boulders, ravines, brambles and desert conditions with scorpions, snakes, lions and other predators. Even people who were not shepherds had probably seen one returning to the village long after the flock with a lost sheep carried lovingly on his shoulders and experienced the rejoicing of the village people, glad that the lost sheep had been found and both it and the shepherd safely returned.

The people would also understand that the floors of the houses were beaten dirt and covered with dried reeds and that it would be dark in the house where the only natural light came probably from one circular hole of 18" in diameter or less; they would truly understand how difficult it would be to find a lost coin under these circumstances. But they would understand the importance of the coin to the economic well-being of the family, or if it were one of the 10 coins that formed the headdress of a married woman (like we use rings today to symbolize marriage). They could easily see how finding such a coin would bring great joy to the woman.

What better examples could you use to explain how happy God is when someone, one of us, who has been lost is found? Well, maybe the parable of the prodigal son that follows immediately after the scripture verses for today and that has the same message. But let's not quibble about that. Recall rather that Jesus is telling these

parables in response to the Pharisees and Scribes self-righteous criticism of Jesus spending time with sinners. And also, please notice that Jesus places no distinction upon the lost sheep or coin. For example, he doesn't say that the sheep was a favorite who was raised by the shepherd from birth using a bottle, or that the lost coin is of any greater value than the others still in the woman's possession. So, **anyone** who is lost is a concern for God, and causes God to try to recover them. Yes, God doesn't just sit around, God tries to facilitate our return and is always with us, even when we are lost. And God appreciates our help in accomplishing this task with regard to others, like Jesus is doing while hanging out with the marginalized.

I'm sure that we've all been lost at times, because we have all sinned. And by "lost" I mean separated from a relationship with God. I know what it is to be lost and I have the scars to prove it. My 20 years in the wilderness, as I fondly refer to them, began shortly after I graduated from college and lasted until my early 40s. Statistics tell us that many of us stray during these years, despite being raised in a church. But let me say emphatically at this point that my scars were of my own making, self-inflicted. God did not punish me for the loss of our relationship – not once. Sadly, if I had not gotten lost, I might have made better decisions, and probably would have avoided certain situations, and thus the scars. But in looking back over those 20 years, I can see that God was with me, trying to help me – even though I was lost, not truly interested in a relationship with God at that time.

I confess that I had no real thought of coming home or being found. I think that, in part, this was because of the way I thought of God – as a supernatural being. Something like us, but greater and more powerful than us; a being who was transcendent, in heaven, out there wherever that is and who intervened at times, like freeing the Israelites from Egypt, sending Jesus to live among us, etc. Well, that was western theism of the time (and for some still is). I didn't understand that God is also immanent; with us, in us, present with us. So, it was easy to give up on a relationship with a god that was far away and not really engaged in my day-to-day life. Now it would be more difficult.

I didn't understand how badly God wanted a relationship with me, to be a part of my life – a life partner, if you will. I didn't think of it like the WWII recruiting poster – some of you will remember – the famous one with a picture of Uncle Sam pointing at the viewer of the poster – with the words "Uncle Sam wants you." If we had a picture of God, we

could use that pose and those words to illustrate the message of today.

God wants you, and you, and you, ... every one of us individually. No matter what you've done or haven't done, no matter how many times you have been lost during your life. God wants each one of you; God loves each of you. God is with you – God will be there in the valley of the shadow of death – in the darkest corners of this world, and in your joyous moments - wherever you are, whatever you are doing, God is with you. God really desires a relationship with you, and God will surely rejoice when that happens – every time it happens.

And that is why I believe that William Barclay refers to this chapter in Luke as “the gospel in the gospel.”

In the name of the One God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.  
Amen.