

## Proper 19, Year C

Exodus 32:7-14  
Psalm 14  
1 Timothy 1:12-17  
Luke 15:1-10

Lost and found

Here is Jesus talking to the religious jobsworths and nitpickers, the people who put duty before compassion. He uses stories about people losing things, searching for them, and finding them.

What is the message for the listeners – that is, those who put rules before people – in these stories of lost and found? Is Jesus hinting that they might have lost something?

Maybe it's that in their eagerness to keep rules, they have lost themselves. Maybe it's that their humanity and their joy and fun are lost among rules and regulations; lost among their pride, their certainty that they, and only they, have right on their side.

The shepherd seeks out the lost sheep and brings it home. The woman seeks a lost coin and brings it home, as it were. These are stories of restoration. They come before that most moving tale of restoration – the man with two sons, the gracious father, the so-called prodigal son. Another story of lost and found. One son is lost in recklessness and wilfulness, the other in envy and resentment. The gracious father welcomes the wanderer home, and is ready to 'welcome' the sulker back to grace.

Homecoming is the theme. Homecoming is what Christianity is all about: forgiveness, *shalom*, reconciliation, restoration.

Getting lost, however distressing, is necessary. We can't seek something until we realize that we've lost it. We need to miss something in order to welcome it home. Although sometimes we are like the a-wandering and a-squandering son, and sometimes we are like the begrudging son, we need to move beyond them, and become the *father*: compassionate, welcoming, forgiving. This is how we find eternity and peace – when we are ready to welcome back *home*.

And what is it that we need to welcome home?

It's that part of us that we have lost: that part of us that have covered up with fig-leaves of pride, arrogance, and the certainty that we are right. It was never lost, of course, just hidden from view. The sanctuary of the soul. If only we knew it, what we seek is what we already have: the Divine within. We can't reach this inner self unless we *have* been lost. We re-turn, and return as we strip away the leaves of *amour propre*, the dignity on which we are so ready to stand.

Coming home to the Divine. Through re-turning we return to the divine by surrendering.

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.* (T S Eliot, *Little Gidding*)

In my ministry, I find that nearly all our spiritual sickness comes from a sense of guilt or shame about the past. Such guilt and shame often come from our not having accepted ourselves for the maimed creatures we are. When we acknowledge that we are imperfect, and see the full extent of our imperfections, we come home. We find ourselves. We relax into ourselves. When we confess our sins, we feel great liberation, a great sense of being at home.

*I turn with groaning from my evil ways, and I re-turn into my heart, and with all my heart I turn to thee. God of those who turn, and saviour of sinners, evening after evening I will re-turn in the innermost marrow of my soul. (Lancelot Andrewes 1555-1626)*

In today's stories about lost and found, and in Exodus, we are assured that the Lord is never indifferent. The shepherd seeks out the lost sheep and brings it home. The lost sheep is part of self. We are no use to anyone, least of all ourselves, unless we recognize our own need for homecoming, our own longing for the Divine.

*Lead, kindly Light, amid th'encircling gloom, lead Thou me on!  
The night is dark, and I am far from home; lead Thou me on!  
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see The distant scene; one step enough for me.*

*I was not ever thus, nor prayed that Thou shouldst lead me on;  
I loved to choose and see my path; but now lead Thou me on!  
I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears, Pride ruled my will. Remember not past years!*

*So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still will lead me on.  
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till the night is gone,  
And with the morn those angel faces smile, which I have loved long since, and lost awhile!  
(J H Newman)*