

**“lost and found”**  
**A Sermon for the Federated Church in Thomaston**  
**Thomaston, Maine**  
**Sunday, September 15, 2019**  
**Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet**  
**Scripture: Luke 15:1-10**

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “Which one of you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Luke 15:1-10

Will you pray with me. Shepherding God, we are lost much of the time. Some of us admit this reality and spend our lives trying to find you in the midst of emptiness and difficulties. Others of us do not believe we are lost, only distracted by too many responsibilities and too little time to seek you out. And still others think looking for you is a waste of time because you do not exist in their minds’ eye. Give us all a break, O God – those of us who know we are lost, those who think they are too busy to be lost, and those who don’t know even how to imagine being lost. Amen.

Well, today’s text from the Gospel of Luke is about God’s “lost and found department.” It comes to us in the RCL, that’s the Revised Common Lectionary, in the week that is seared in our minds if we were alive and old enough to understand the news on September 11, 2001. I went back into my sermon files this week, and pulled out the sermon I wrote and delivered on September 16, 2001. I would like to share most of it with you, as I think it holds as much truth now in our divided country and world as it did in 2001.

I began, “I am taking liberties again in pushing our Scripture passage perhaps further than it would go if we were going to consider it in its original context. I am pushing it further than it would go if we were going to hold it at arm’s length, as I believe we so often do with Scripture passages. We keep them neat and tidy that way. They make more sense that way. We do this not because we want to keep our distance from them necessarily, but because we have no reference point in our immediate lives to bring them up close and personal.

But TODAY [this was September 16, 2001], we have a reference point. TODAY our Scripture passage IS up close and personal. TODAY we are DIFFERENT than we were a week ago, in ways we could never have expected, or predicted, or wanted. TODAY we live in a different country than any of us, as Americans, have ever lived in. TODAY we join other peoples in other parts of the world who know, and who try to survive on a daily basis, the reality of the ugliness and the hatred that lead to human

beings being willing to give up their lives and to take the lives of others with them for the sake of corrupted and misguided beliefs.

It is not the principles of the great faith systems of the world that kill. It is not a particular nation that kills. It is not all dark skinned people with dark hair who kill. It is human beings gone awry who must feel they have nothing to lose who kill. It is the dramatic and horrific response to 'having nothing to lose,' that has caused so many to lose their lives this week and so many more to mourn their deaths.

Jesus' parables in today's Scripture reading both focus on what it means to lose and what it means to be found, and then on what it means to BE lost and what it means to be FOUND.

What have we lost? I'll give you a list of things I've come up with that we've lost. We have lost over 5,000 lives of innocent people. We have lost the World Trade Center, one of the great landmarks, certainly, of the largest city in this country. We have lost billions of dollars that will have to be spent to clean up the physical property destroyed, to honor and soothe the human emotional, mental and physical distress created, and to right the injustice and cruelty that has been inflicted upon us.

We have lost our innocence and our naivete as a society of people who believed we were indomitable and immune to the terrors that go on daily in other parts of the world. We have lost our 'one-upmanship' in the world. We have lost the free and independent way of life we have always known and cherished as Americans – in principal, if not always in reality for some minorities in our country.

But, we have not lost everything. What have we found this week [the week of September 11, 2001]? We have found a renewed sense of patriotism in our history and in our way of government. We have found renewed meaning in our hymns and songs of this land. We have found faith where we didn't know it was hiding, in ourselves and in others. We have found bravery and a willingness to help strangers, both financially and in person and in spirit, that we didn't know we had. We have found tears of grief and loss shed for thousands of people we've never met and never would have met. We have found a sense of compassion that blurs political, social, and faith differences and brings them to one accord. We have found friends we didn't know we had around the world.

I received an e-mail yesterday morning at 6:03 a.m. [this was September 15, 2001] from a friend of mine in Krasnodar in the south of Russia. I had e-mailed Natasha on the night of September 11 to tell her that I was o.k. I knew she would be concerned when she heard the news of what had happened in the United States because she's never been outside of Russia. I knew that disaster on the 'east coast of the US,' to Natasha, could mean I'd been hurt or killed.

I've known Natasha since I was in Russia in September of 1994. She was one of my hosts while I was there for twelve days. I stayed in her home with her. Natasha's home at that time was a two room flat on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor of what we would consider in this country to be a tenement high-rise apartment building.

In 1994 Natasha was making about fifty cents a day as a professional university instructor teaching English. I haven't seen her since the time we spent together in September 1994. But we have kept in touch – it's easier now that we have not only e-mail but SKYPE.

I want to share with you what she wrote to me. “Dear Susan! I was shocked when I saw on TV the reports about the tragedy which happened in your home. Now the emotions settled down. Our internet center didn’t work for several days, but when I first saw it on TV I didn’t believe that it was something real. It was like a scene from a Hollywood catastrophe film. It is difficult to believe that people can be so cruel and full of hatred to people. All people in Krasnodar were talking about it and were scared that it may continue and grow into a real world war. I couldn’t think of anything but poor people who became victims of this horrible event. The worst is to think that innocent people die. I am so happy that you were not hurt. Hard to talk about it. This is the case when words are useless. I pray that such things never repeat. I am sure that when you think about something with emotions you pray for it, whether you realize it or not. I am sure that people all over the world are with the people of the USA and they share this tragedy and they feel how little is our planet. It is our home and it happened in our home and we all, our governments, should do something for it not to happen again. But they should be wise and try not to hurt innocent people either. I will try to contact you very soon. I want you to have my love and prayers. You are very special. Natasha”

I will tell you what I think is the most important thing we have found this week [this was the week of September 11, 2001] – it is what Natasha wrote to me – “people all over the world share this tragedy and they feel how little is our planet. It is our home and it happened in our home...” We have found “how little is our planet,” and that we have friends and we are friends with millions of people we’ve never met for whom peace and love and good will are paramount.

Most people have hung out the American flag this week – in front of their homes, their businesses and along side the roadsides. But I think we have need for another flag to stand beside the American flag that symbolizes “how little is our planet” and how dramatically this week we have found our need for one another around the world.

[I ended my sermon on Sunday, September 16, 2001 with these words]: “In Jesus’ parables, both the shepherd who found one lost sheep and the woman who found one lost coin exclaim, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found what was lost.’ Rejoice with ME, for we have found friends in this country and around the world we thought we’d lost and that we didn’t know we had. May God help us find peace in the days and months ahead and bless us all this day.”

On this 15<sup>th</sup> day of September, 2019, can we remember and mourn what we lost in 2001 in our country? But perhaps more importantly, do we remember and feel joy for what we found?

The major theme of the Bible is not about our love for God and for one another, as noble as those themes are. The greatest theme is about God’s faith in us – no matter how foolish we are, no matter how far we wander or how many messes we get ourselves into.

No matter how bad we’ve been, no matter how much we have sinned against God and our fellow humans, no matter whether we turn to God or not when we feel lost, no matter what.... God turns to us and seeks us out the same way the shepherd searching for his sheep, and the woman searching for her coin persist in their search. God’s persistence never ends. God’s “lost and found department” is always open for business.

Let the people say, “Amen.”