

Sermon by Lex Breckinridge 9/15/2019

Pentecost 17

Luke 15 : 1-10

Welcome to the Second Sunday of A Season of Gratitude here at St. Thomas. That's how I'm hoping we'll live this year. In gratitude for all that we have and all that we are. In gratitude for the love of Christ Jesus which fills our hearts and in gratitude for this community where we come together to live and practice that love. This summer as the Stewardship Team gathered to begin planning the year, that's what kept emerging for us. Gratitude for God's love and gratitude for each other. So we decided to just call it out. God invites us all to turn our hearts to gratitude. Once again this morning we have the opportunity to express our gratitude to God and for our lives together here. If you didn't get a chance to do this last Sunday, please take a minute to complete these cards. We're collecting the responses and will be posting them. And that reminds me that gratitude isn't just a thought or isn't just something we say. You know "thank you very much". Gratitude is a way of living. A way of seeing the world and being in the world that's really life giving. So one thing I'm particularly grateful for is last Sunday. We celebrated Homecoming Sunday and it was just wonderful.

We had 52 stations set up all across the campus staffed by more than 70 committed volunteers to highlight the many ministry opportunities at St. Thomas. A glorious day and a great testament that so many of us feel that S. Thomas is our spiritual home. We know that however far we may travel or wander, this home is always waiting for us.

So how interesting that we come to three parables this morning about wandering and returning, about losing and finding. Now, you may be saying to yourself, "wait a minute. I was paying attention and I only heard two parables being read. Where's the third one?"

Well, the 15th chapter of Luke finds Jesus telling three parables to his friends, and to the religious authorities, who were grumbling that he had invited tax collectors, sinners, and other outcasts to dinner with him. So, good teacher that he is, instead of lecturing them, or pointing the finger at them, he tells them stories. Three of them. The Parable of the lost Sheep, and the Parable of the Lost Coin, which we read a minute ago. And right after those, which our lectionary doesn't include today, is the very familiar Parable of the Prodigal Son. And all of these parables are certainly about how God values what seems to be lost, about

how God relentlessly reaches out to find and recover what has seemingly been lost.

Now if you're anything like me, you've been lost a time or two in your life, and not just when driving from Point A to Point B. I mean "lost" as in, I'm looking for home and can't find my way back. Like that lost sheep Jesus was talking about. And I hope you know the joy, the relief, when you find home or home finds you once again. It's the relief, really, of allowing ourselves to be found by God, the relentless God who never forgets us, who never loses us, even though we too often try to hide ourselves away from God.

That's certainly what these three stories are about. But there's also something else going on here that I'd like to spend a minute or so on. Think about Jesus' audience for these stories. The religious authorities, the men who are righteous, the ones who do no wrong, at least as far as they're concerned, the ones that is to say who are dead certain that they've earned God's favor. Keep that word "earned" in mind. So these righteous religious authorities are just scandalized when they find Jesus sharing table fellowship with those who had broken moral laws and who had broken ritual codes of purity. I don't know about you, but I've fallen off the straight and arrow a time or two in my life, and maybe not strictly observed all the ritual purity codes our culture lays down for us, and I've been on the wrong end of some pretty serious finger-wagging by some pretty self-assured folks. It's not fun. It can, in fact, be shaming. The irony here is that the "grumbling" of the religious authorities is meant to remind us of the grumbling of the people of Israel in the wilderness when they were unhappy with Moses' leadership and, really, with God. Yet even in the face of all their grumbling and acting out, God showed mercy. So fast forward about 1200 years to Jesus being the object of grumbling because he is showing mercy to someone besides the religious authorities, who, after all, thought they had earned God's favor. And they were sure those "others", those sinners, had not.

So they must have been offended, by the first parable which Jesus pointedly concludes by saying ".....there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent." What? Clearly, Jesus is pointing to them in all their self-righteousness, in all their arrogant certainty that they are right and those "others", those sinners are wrong.

In the second parable, "the righteous persons who need no repentance" have disappeared. They seem to have lost their place, in fact. The focus isn't on the

transactional nature of repentance, which can sometimes be mistaken for earning God's favor. Instead, the focus is on celebration, God's joy over the ones who respond to God's mercy. And rejoicing calls for celebration. The parable invites the righteous to join the celebration, and to give thanks for God's mercy instead of calculating who's earned what.

