

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 11, 2016

"Turn Around"
by Mary Anne Biggs

1 Timothy 1:12-17 ~ Luke 15:1-10

If you're not a former Roman Catholic, you may have never heard this prayer: "Tony, Tony, turn around. Something's lost that must be found." I learned in parochial school to try praying it when I had lost my homework or library book. It's a prayer to St. Anthony of Padua who is believed to be the patron saint of lost items. The 13th-century holy man left a wealthy family to become a poor priest. The tradition of invoking St. Anthony's help in finding lost or stolen things traces back to a scene from his own life. As the legend goes, Anthony had a book of psalms that, in his eyes, was priceless. There was no printing press yet and any book had value. And this was his book of psalms, his prayer book. Besides, in the margins he'd written all kinds of notes to use in teaching students in his Franciscan Order. A novice ... who had already grown tired of living a religious life ... decided to leave the community. Besides going AWOL, he also took Anthony's Psalter! When he went to his room to pray and found it missing, Anthony prayed it would be found and returned to him.

After he prayed his prayer, the thieving novice fleeing through the forest, was met by a demon (okay, this part of the story is murky ... how a negative could be an avenue of God's good). Anyway, the demon told the thief to return the Psalter to Anthony and to return to the Franciscan Order. He did, and was accepted back.

Soon after Anthony's death, people began praying through him to find or recover lost and stolen articles. "A Prayer to Christ," written in honor of St. Anthony shortly after his death goes like this:

*The sea obeys and fetters break
And shattered hopes limbs thou dost restore
While treasures lost are found again
When young or old thine aid implore.*

The popular version of this is "Tony, Tony, turn around. Something's lost that must be found," and that was the first thing that popped into my head when I read the lectionary reading for today.

Chapter 15 is the heart of Luke's Gospel. This week we hear two of its three parables of Lost and Found. Lost sheep and a lost coin ... Jesus uses images for God that were offensive to his listeners ... a shepherd and a woman. And they're both "one bubble off plumb" if you stop to think about it. In the first case, a shepherd searches for a lost sheep. Natural enough, we think, as that's the shepherd's job. But to do it he puts 99 sheep at risk, leaving them in the wilderness with no protection or shelter, to seek out one that was lost. And when he finds the lost sheep, he hustles the whole flock home and calls his friends and neighbors to join in his celebration. Normal? Ordinary? Hardly!

In the second case, a woman who loses a tenth of her wealth lights her lamp and sweeps all night searching for the coin. Makes sense to me. But then, when she finds it, she also calls together

her neighbors and invites them to celebrate ... which likely meant that she provided food and drink and perhaps spent on this celebration as much as she recovered from her search. Normal ... ordinary? No chance! Which is, of course, the point. This kind of ridiculous celebration is what characterizes God's response to sinners who repent.

Repentance may include a mending of one's ways and moral reform, but the chief characteristic is a turning around ... a change in perspective ... a recognition ... to bring us full circle ... of being lost and a corresponding desire to turn around and be found. Which leads me to wonder ... can you be righteous and still lost?

Because here's the thing ... the major differentiating category in these parables seems to be, for lack of a better word, "lost-ness." Which is interesting, because at first everything seems to revolve around the distinction between sinner and righteous. Luke sets the context for Jesus telling these two short parables. *First* we have the tax collectors and sinners flocking to listen to Jesus and, *second*, the Pharisees and scribes grumbling because he not only *doesn't* send them away but actually eats with them. And we must remember that "eating" isn't catching a quick bite at the local coffee house and moving on. Eating ... that is, sharing table fellowship ... is a mark of camaraderie, acceptance, and friendship. In eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus is demonstrating a deep and abiding acceptance of those whom society has deemed beyond the moral pale.

And that brings up another point ... while we're used to thinking "we're all sinners," that's not the way Luke sees it. Rather, when he describes someone as a "*sinner*" he's talking about someone whose pattern of sinning is so habitual ... even second nature ... that the whole community knows of it. Similarly, by "*righteous*" Luke doesn't mean those who are either perfect or self-righteous, but rather he describes those who actually and actively try to live up to the law. All of which means that Jesus is welcoming the local untouchables and ne'er-do-wells ... the moral disgraces and public outcasts ... welcoming, accepting, and befriending, to the point of embarrassment. And the decent folk are ... quite understandably ... concerned.

In that context, Jesus tells these stories. But they're not, as soon becomes clear, stories about the difference between sinner and righteous. Rather, they are about things we lose ... a sheep ... a coin ... and the joy we experience when we find these things again. And so I'm back to my original question ... Can you be righteous and still lost?

After wrestling with this passage, I think we can. Indeed, I think we are. Because here's the thing, most of us are a lot more like the righteous in these stories than the sinners. Most of us try very hard to be good Christians and to do the right thing. But though we may be righteous in this sense, might we also be lost?

- Might the parents who want their children to succeed so much that they wrap their whole lives around hockey games and dance recitals be lost?
- Might the career minded man or woman who has made moving up the ladder the one and only priority be lost?
- Might the folks who work jobs they hate just to give their family things they never had be lost?
- Might the senior citizen who has a great pension plan but little sense of meaning since retirement be lost?

- Might the teen who works so hard to be perfect and who is willing to do just about anything to fit in be lost?
- Might the earnest Christian who is constantly asking whether people have accepted Jesus into their hearts be lost?
- Might...? Well, you get the picture.

It's not that there's anything inherently wrong with being righteous. Working hard, doing your best, showing up for church on time, these are all good things. But ultimately they only scratch the surface of who we are and what we need and hope for. To put it another way, describing ourselves primarily in terms of whether we're sinner or righteous is a legal designation that ultimately defines ourselves by *what we have done*. While understanding ourselves as lost ... and ultimately as being found ... is a much more existential and relational way of understanding *who we are*. And God, finally, is there to grant us an identity beyond what we have done, are doing, or may someday do.

I know lots of good folks, righteous people, who seem to have it all together and yet, deep down, are just plain lost. Maybe you do too. Having it all together is great, but we may still feel quite lost at times. We may well have many lost coins clinking around on the floor of our congregation ... lost hope ... lost faith ... lost self-esteem ... lost perspective ... so many lost items ... so little time. A woman once told me when I was the pastor in Nekoosa, "I can't stand to go into our Church anymore, not since my husband's funeral there last year." If there is someone in our church who feels this way, we have got to find her lost hope for her and give it back to her!

I once made a call on a young woman who had suddenly dropped out of sight. She told me that she was fearful of coming back because she didn't know what she would do if she was confronted with a baptism. She said, "It's because since my miscarriage I have lost my faith." I knew I had to try to help find her faith for her and give it back to her.

As Christians, we are in the business of helping people find lost items. Isn't that in our job description? To be the Good Shepherd who goes out finding those lost sheep, risking skinned knees and strained wrists as we crawl into the ravines where they have stranded themselves? Or wait, maybe we're to be the loving parental figure of Motel 6, "leaving the light on" for them ... keeping the home-faith fires burning while they're out for a decade or so finding themselves. Isn't this our calling? To be the ones charged with turning on the lights ... getting out the dirt devil, and listen for the thump that tells us a significant object has been sucked into the vacuum bag? Then get in there with both hands and retrieve that thing. Get out there and bring in those new members. Give those seekers what they're searching for. Be it the music ... the message ... the sense of mission. We are the ones called to proclaim that word ... to serve up that Bread of Life.

In all this finding activity, what are we in danger of losing? Not much as far as Luke is concerned. For Luke the treasures of the life of discipleship were the habits of persistent prayer ... compassion for the poor ... and joy.

One Sunday morning several years ago, on my way into the church our family attended in Texas, I spotted the Lost and Found box in the entry way and decided to look through it to see if I could find my son's ball cap. His ball cap wasn't in it, but there was a pair of glasses in there ... a set of keys ... a watch. They all seemed pretty crucial to me, but I realized that the people who had lost them were still coping without them. And I know that there is a lot that can show up in the

lost and found box of our lives lying in there unclaimed. It's possible to lose a lot of things and keep on keeping on.

You can lose Direction ... Faith ... Faculties ... Friends.

You can lose Focus ... Ground ... Hair ... Hope.

You can lose Heart ... Head ... Keys ... Mind.

You can lose Mobility ... Perspective ... Respect ... Spark.

You can lose Sanity ... Teeth ... Temper ... Touch.

Sometimes when you lose something, it's a good strategy to retrace your steps and find the spot where you lost it. Revisit the stores where you might have left your credit card. Check the sink where you took off your wedding band and put in on the soap dish. Retrace your steps.

But do we bother to take the time to find what we have lost spiritually? Where did we mislay our communion time with God in favor of a crammed calendar? Where did we temporarily misplace our compassion for the poor in favor of lower taxes? And where did we leave our joy in proclaiming God's Word? When did we slip out of saying, "Thank God Sunday's coming because I can invite my friend to church" in favor of "Thank God Sunday's coming because I can invite my friend to brunch?"

Searching is hard work, but when your energy is all used up, and gone, that's okay too. Just lie in the corner and God will find you. God will retrieve *you*, too. Can we even begin to calculate how much more valuable is a lost soul than a lost coin?

I promise you that in the end, this parable isn't ultimately about sinner or righteous and not even about being lost and found. It's about a God so crazy in love with God's children that this God will do anything to find them ... to find us.

Which of you, Jesus asks, would go to such lengths to search and find and then welcome back and celebrate? Truth be told, none of us would. But God would. In fact, God does, even now, putting all at risk to seek us out ... lighting a lamp and sweeping, sweeping, sweeping until we are all caught up in God's mercy, grace, and love. Thanks be to God.

May we pray?

Most of us don't have that far to go, O God, to find you. Most of us aren't wandering lost and alone. Rather, it's your heart we lack. It's our incapacity to realize how much you love us and to respond to such grace. It's our inability to feel the joy you feel in the searching and the finding of one struggling soul. It's our inadequacy in loving all people the way you love all people without condition. Give us the heart of Christ to search for those who feel lost in a lonely world and the joy of Christ over one child of God who joins with us in the communion of your Spirit. Amen.