



## 15 PENTECOST (PROPER 19)

24 Ordinary

12 September 2004

Exodus 32:7-14

Psalm 51:1-11

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

The Scribes and the Pharisees mutter: This fellow welcomes *sinners*—and *eats* with them. And Jesus replies—Which 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 you find that one?

Raucous laughter, rolling eyes. Has he finally lost his mind? Too much fasting—or too much drinking? See the looks on the faces of the Pharisees and Scribes. Nothing to fear from this one after all. You don't have to be a shepherd to know that neither a hired hand nor any sheep owner in Palestine or on the face of the earth would leave a whole flock to go after one stray sheep. One lost sheep out of a hundred – an acceptable loss – the cost of doing business. And as for calling together all one's friends for a party after having abandoned the whole flock to go after one lost sheep—what sort of person would even want to admit to such a dumb-ass stunt—let alone celebrate it?

And what sort of woman would throw a party after turning the house upside down to find one lost coin? A crazy woman that's who. When's the last time you spent a hundred bucks throwing a party on account of finding some spare change under the cushions of the sofa or stuck inside the recliner chair? College kids might . . . but that's precisely the point: sane, responsible adults don't go in for the kind of behavior. So what's Jesus saying? That the Christ of God is *meshuggenah*? God is nuts, irresponsible, loopy in the head? Yup. Exactly.

During communion, we're going to sing *Amazing Grace*. You know how those words go, *I once was lost, but now am found*? Forget the *once was lost* bit—I'm continually getting lost. If there's one thing I'm really, really good at, it's losing my way. Sometimes I do it up real big, in a way that everybody notices, that starts people wondering what's wrong with the pastor. Other times, while I may be way lost, I manage to fake it quite well.

Surely some of you know what I mean—surely some of you get lost a great deal of the time too. But I come to bear witness: Even as I am continually losing my ways, I am continually being found. No, I don't see Jesus coming after me wearing a bathrobe and sandals and carrying a home-made shepherds' crook . . . at least not often. The Christ of God who finds me does, however, look rather ordinary and everyday. Some days when God's Christ finds me, she looks rather like a ninety-year old woman with white hair wound around her head in a braid. Other days, the Christ who finds me is pushing a noisy, rattling shopping cart down the alley and smells gawd-awful and looks ungodly worse. There are days too when the Christ who finds me looks for all the world like a little pre-schooler kneeling at the altar rail, a big smile on his face as he extends his tiny, open hand to receive the Eucharist.

When I am lost, God finds me through concrete means—through God's holy church—through you. And each of you knows how you have been found, how you keep getting found, over and over and over again—you know how each time, God looks like someone quite ordinary in your midst. But you know, it's the

strangest thing trying to sort out who's the lost and who's the one finding the lost. When I'm the most lost, and I come into the presence of somebody else who's lost—somebody else who's hip deep in quicksand like me—and sinking quickly, like me—somehow in coming together—we both get found—and the God who finds us looks exactly like the other lost one.

It is in the company of the lost – in the Church, the Body of Christ—that we are found by God—through Christ, who just happens to look like us. Just as we are at the same time sinners and saints, so too are we at the same time the lost and the ones who find the lost. We in the Church are at once the ones being saved and the ones through whom God is working to do the saving.

I am not infrequently asked— “What about those who are not a part of the Church—what about those who have drifted away, those who were never a part of the church, those who refuse to have anything to do with the church? What about those who die completely lost? Will God find them? Will God save them?” St. Paul, in the letter to the church in Rome, says, “Listen to this confounding mystery – the call and the promises of God are irrevocable—they are forever, eternal, beyond time.” It was at Easter that we come to hear and to know that the grace of God cannot be stopped by death. The call and promises of God go out to all the lost—the call and promise of God, the odd and searching shepherd will not be stopped by death—God will search even beyond death, until all are found. Beyond death and all time, God is the eccentric woman who searches and searches for the smallest of lost coins—sorting through the lint and crumbs stuck in the folds of the sofa, who throws a party for all her friends whenever each of the lost is found.

And so this morning—a party of sorts—a party in which God finds us and in which God celebrates the lost being brought home yet again. And so it continues: each day, God finding us no matter where we have gotten ourselves lost; each day, God using us to find those other lost ones—and together each day, the company of the lost and found gathers—and the whole company of heaven joins together and sings with the most odd God, with the most odd God who will not rest—until that time beyond time when each and every created thing is at last brought home, safe and sound and found forever.