Losing and Finding … and Rejoicing

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Texts:
 Exodus 32:7-14
 Luke 15:1-10

Here is the zoom link to Ann’s teaching: <https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/627GIwnzY_nP_qkdaKLwxGivItu0o7bvL2gs3P_8QhEZv4UvdyXt1SdiyOm2aRc.U2CmkC0c6Wbb1Z-u?startTime=1662906645000>

In today’s Gospel Jesus tells parables about individuals who lose something of great value to them, search for it, find it, and then rejoice with family and neighbors. Lost sheep and lost coin. The final story that Luke records in chapter 15 is The Prodigal Son. The boy wanders away, eats with the pigs, and then gives his father great joy because he comes back home.

 Let’s reflect a little on what the Scripture can teach us about losing and finding. And rejoicing.

Events in our recent history have compelled my imagination, and I have tried to connect them to our Scriptures.

Today is Sept 11, nine/one/one.  For some of us, those numbers will always evoke the horror on our TV screens: the plane ramming into the tall tower of the World Trade Building in New York. 9/11/2001 and the sudden violent deaths — literally out of the blue — of thousands of people who were just going about their daily lives. I’m still having trouble all these years later trying to discover whether a coin of good might be salvaged from the losses that day. Because that loss led to more loss, especially the disaster of the so called “war on terror,” and the thousands upon thousands of lives destroyed in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

 Some news commentators said that the foreign attack on geographical US caused “loss of innocence”  or “a loss of the American sense of invulnerability.” Two American idols —   Golden Calves —  were lost or partially lost that day: the New York twin towers of American corporate might and the Pentagon, seat and symbol of US military might. A third pillar of American power, the US Capitol Building was spared because of the courage of a few people who caused their hijacked plane to crash in a field in Pennsylvania instead of against the Capitol Building. Thank God for their courage. Thank God for his mercy on 9/11, and thank God for God’s enduring long-suffering patience

Let me read part of today’s Old Testament Scripture in Exodus which tells a story of God’s patience and his mercy: Moses comes down from the mountain where God has revealed his Law and discovers that the people are worshipping an idol — a Golden Calf crafted out of the people’s gold that they’d thrown on a pile and melted down.

Exodus 32: 7-14

7 Then the Lord said to Moses, “…Your people have become corrupt. 8 They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, Israel.’”

9 … The Lord said to Moses, “They are a stiff-necked people. 10 Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them.”

11 But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. “Lord,” he said, “why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand. Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people.” … 14 Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

Perhaps some unknown Moses interceded for us on 9/11 and spared us an even worse calamity than the one we experienced.

A recent disastrous response to loss that our country is experiencing right now stems from a lost election. What happens when a third of the country stubbornly will not accept a loss and are willing to live a lie? “Make the election go our way,” demand the Jan 6 insurrectionists.

 We pray that God will spare us the loss of our democracy.

  Finally, I’d like us to reflect together on another story of losing and finding. Busloads of migrants are arriving daily at Union Station in Washington, in Chicago, and at the NY Port Authority. Asylum seekers, mainly from Venezuela, but also from Central America and Africa. They are unexpected and unplanned for. They are people in great need. The newcomers have experienced great loss. They’ve lost their homes, work, communities, and families.

 Are we as a church community called to search out these people who’ve experienced such great loss and help them find new places of safety and happiness? Outcomes for lost people at Union Station are uncertain, but if they find welcome and hospitality here, they may find a new safety and a better life. I am hopeful about the help that is being given by volunteers and organizations such as Pastor Vidal’s church, Carecen, and Family Place. (I’ve brought a few flyers that Family Place is distributing, listing ways to help and some of you are familiar with other responses.) On this past Thursday, Mayor Bowser declared a “Migrant Emergency” that will release funds to coordinate aid.

But sometimes I simply feel overwhelmed with the magnitude of loss afflicting living creatures in our world. People and animals threatened with extinction — total loss. Millions and millions of displaced people with no place to go — in Ukraine, Pakistan, African forests and deserts, from sinking islands, Brazilian rain forests, along shorelines. Habitat loss and conflict, entwined disasters, are making things steadily worse.

I am tempted to despair, but despair is not what our faith calls us to.

Over and over the Bible tells us how to respond to loss and the lost. In a just world there is plenty for all. We can assert this as truth. Jesus charges us to welcome the lost ones, house the homeless, invite them to the party, and treat them with the dignity they are due. I believe that our faith tells us that each life lost in the innumerable holocausts of human history is precious to God and will be redeemed. You and I are responsible to God for a few of those lives: our one lost sheep, our one lost coin, our one prodigal son. Our share. It seems so little in the face of the need, until you see the smile on the face of the child to whom you’ve given the container of chocolate milk and a teddy bear.

Jesus lives his instructions. He prefers the company of marginalized people. He eats with publicans and sinners, people who are not respectable in his society.

We are shown in Jesus’ life and teachings the way that he wants us to react to loss. Search and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. Sell all you have to obtain the hidden pearl. The stories tell us to keep looking for what is good, the pearl of great price, the lost coin, the lost sheep, the lost son. There’s a promise: What is lost will be found and the final scene will be rejoicing at a big party. The most honored guests at the party will be people who thought they wouldn’t even be invited: the sinners and tax-collectors, the blind and the lame, the widows and orphans, the outcasts and displaced.

 Think for a moment about loss in your own life.

Perhaps you or your parents were refugees. My parents and grandparents were. They trusted God and depended on the kindness of strangers.

Perhaps your loss is a job; a marriage; a marathon; a home; a loved one. Perhaps you’re thinking of lost time. Lost chances.

 Now reflect on the other side of the coin: something you have found that makes you joyful.

Your partner; your new baby; a friend; good memories of a trip or a successful project. I think about the joy my mission at Family Place has given me. Some of you have found satisfying new work after losing a job; you have found a great retirement community after grieving the loss of the home in which you raised your family; you experienced reconciliation with someone important to you. Some of you have experienced the joy of being called to a mission and responding to that call.

Sometimes when we search for what’s lost, we find we must give up familiar comforts and lay claim to a future we have only begun to be given. The shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep to find the one. The woman leaves nine coins to find the one. What guarantees of my present security will I sacrifice for the uncertain hope of finding what has been lost? Why risk it?

As followers of Jesus, we are called to be part of the Gospel story. Likely we change roles in the story at different stages in our lives. At this moment are you the Pharisee or the searcher? Are you lost and hoping to be found.

To live, Jesus says, we must be ready to die. To reach the life that is truly Life, we must move away from our familiar relationships and comforts and lay claim to a future we cannot see. But the promise is that in following Jesus we will find good company at the supper table where Jesus is host … and great cause for rejoicing.

May it be so.