

**Sermon**  
**September 15, 2019**  
**Proper 19C**  
**The Rev. Gary R. Brower, PhD**

**Exodus 32.7-14**  
**Psalm 51.1-11**  
**1 Timothy 1.12-17**  
**Luke 15.1-10**

I invite you to turn to page 41 in the *Book of Common Prayer*, and direct your attention to the prayer of confession at the bottom of the page. [Pause] I know we'll be doing the Confession and Absolution in a few minutes, but I ask you to read with me the first seven phrases, finishing with the line, "But thou, O Lord . . ." [Read] Now, take a moment and just think about the words you've read. What facets of the phrases stick with you? What is your mood? Your attitude? [Pause]

This is a prayer some of us say once or twice a day—at Morning and Evening Prayer. (Well, at least those of us who find the language and cadence of traditional forms more in line with our spirituality.) And, those of us who are regular in this spiritual practice, as well as those of us who regularly engage in any spiritual practice—even if it is simply weekly attendance at Sunday services in an Episcopal setting—know that the words we use take hold of us; they become part of the warp and woof of our being. They can become so internalized that, even in the depths of dementia, words from the Prayer Book arise easily when bidden by a hospice chaplain. This internalization is normal and good . . . it is part of what Christian educators want and call "formation". But, as the cliché goes, "familiarity breeds contempt."

Well, "contempt" may be a bit too strong. That said, my suspicion is that most of us, whether we use this prayer regularly, or if we've just heard it, place a moral implication on the phrase "strayed from thy ways like lost sheep". We place it in the context of "erring" and "offending" and "following too much the devices and desires of our own hearts". In other words, we equate being "lost" with "sin". And it is on the notion of "lost"-ness that I'd like to focus today: "lostness" and its solution, or counterpart, "being found".

So, what is it to be "lost"? How many of us have ever been lost, REALLY lost? For those (few) of us for whom this happened, why? Was it intentional? Did we decide to "get lost"? Did the coin in the reading from Luke "go astray" and fall between the cracks? Or, was it foolishness? "Never go on a hike without a compass!" is hammered into Boy Scouts from Day One. If a scout disregards that advice and becomes separated from his troop, that foolishness could put him in

peril—much like the sheep in the reading. But is this situation a moral failing? Is the situation of being “lost” a sin? Or, put another way, in another context that I’ll be discussing in the “Caring for the Creed” class, did those people the church labeled “heretics” get up one morning, and say, “Today, I’ll be wrong!” That’s the ticket! I’ll stray and be wrong!” I don’t think so, yet when we hear “lost” and equate it with “error”, we may be missing the boat.

So, what is it to be lost / found and then recovered / restored? Well, read with these questions in mind, all of the lessons we’ve heard shed some light on the predicament and on God’s place in the equation. Think first of the Exodus reading. We know that the Israelites were “wandering in the desert” and were led by Moses and God to Mt. Sinai. Without that leadership—very tenuous and unusual in those days to be led by an unseen god—they were lost. Listen then, to the verses that led up to our passage.

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.” They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

The Israelites feared being lost! They were in an unknown land, and their leader, their navigator, was missing in action. And they fell back on “Plan B” which they’d seen all around them: visible gods! “We need one, Aaron!” Did they intend to be in error? I don’t think so. They were scared. “God didn’t quite understand that” suggests today’s reading and Moses had to intercede to get divine mercy. Fortunately for those at the base of the mountain, he was successful. God’s care for Israel was greater than God’s anger, AND greater than Israel’s “lostness”.

Or, let's look at the story behind the story in our reading from 1 Timothy. Why was "Paul" persecuting the Jesus movement? Not to put too fine a point on it, he was so stuck in his Pharisaic ways—following that path—that he missed the turn in the road that Jesus had taken. He was lost. Fortunately for Saul/Paul, God rather dramatically restored him to the right path. Was Paul "sinning"? Were his actions/beliefs "wrong"? I don't think so, but he was "lost" until his Damascus Road experience. But God reached out in dramatic fashion and restored him.

"Restoration" is the plea of the psalmist, of course. Psalm 51 does highlight the other, more intentional, aspect of lostness; it is traditionally thought to be David's prayer for forgiveness after his "encounter" with Bathsheba. But I want to focus, instead, on the internal realization of the state of being lost. Like the psalmist, regardless of how we find ourselves lost—David's situation was pointed out to him by Nathan the prophet—once we realize it, our plea is "Help!" We want restoration to the wholeness of being, to fellowship/good relations with others, and, of course, in a religious context, fellowship/good relations with God. Psalm 51 reflects that longing to be found.

And, so, we return to Luke. These stories that Jesus tells are all about God's desire for restoring the lost to "found" status. The **good news** here is that God is constantly looking for us . . . even if we're not looking for God. Whether we're "lost" because of an accident, or someone else's carelessness; or we're lost because of our own foolishness . . . the specifics are unimportant. These stories show how much God wants our mutual relationship to be restored. And when it happens? Joy In Heaven!

As I see it, then, the questions before us today are not moral ones, as the Morning Prayer confession might suggest . . . although certainly there can be moral failings to confess . . . but rather, simply, "Who are the lost?" and "Who is the Seeker?" Who are the lost in our families? Who are the lost in our churches? Who are the lost in our society? They're all around us . . . even if we don't see them. And, of course, how are we, individually, the "lost"? Again, I don't believe this is a moral question, but an existential one on all of our parts: a desire for meaning-making gone haywire that may unintentionally lead us and others down a wrong path.

Finding one's self "lost", or headed down a troubling path, could describe many of those who were the topic of our interfaith panel on mental health and suicide last Wednesday evening. The research and personal stories shared that night all pointed to a profound sense of pain, of disconnect, that no-one would

choose. Yet the negative moral overtones of “lostness” has put many of those of us who experience that pain in such a bind that even asking to be found, to be helped, is unthinkable.

The “unthinkable”, however, lies as a subtext in our readings this morning, although in an “inside-out” way. And this gets at the other question I just raised: “Who is the Seeker?” It is unthinkable that God would relent from destroying, or giving up on, a people who were so clearly unable to follow simple instructions. It’s unthinkable that God would continue to work with David, despite his intentional sin with Bathsheba, and retain him as the great-king-of-memory from whom the Messiah would descend. It is unthinkable that God would seek out a persecutor of the followers of Jesus and make him the Apostle to the Gentiles. “Unthinkable” may not be the best word, but the extravagant rejoicing over the finding of one-out-of-a-hundred sheep, or one-out-of-ten coins is extraordinary. It’s unthinkable that God expends so much energy being a “seeker-of-the-lost”!

So, as much as these lessons point to the condition of being lost, perhaps even more emphasis do they place on the lengths to which God will go to seek out the lost. As John 3.16—the focal point of one of the Daily Office readings for yesterday’s Feast of the Holy Cross—puts it, “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son to the end that all who believe in him might have eternal life”. That is, in Jesus, God constantly throws a life-line to those of us who are lost!

In some ways we are all lost; it is, no doubt, part of our human condition! And, so, the confession is right. Some of us have erred, some just strayed. But, all are lost and probably want restoration. Again, the good news is that God wants that too. That is a future to which we can aspire: restoration of all people with God. And, we—individually and corporately—have a task—it’s part of our baptismal vows: a task to participate in that universal restoration. We must seek our own reconciliation, certainly—with God and with others. But, we must also, I believe, lay aside our “found” status—so easy to translate into self-righteousness—and seek out the lost and, then, walk humbly with them back onto the right path. We are the woman who lost the coin. . . but then sought it. We are the shepherd seeking the sheep that wandered off. We are God’s hands in the larger work of restoration of all the lost, regardless of circumstances. And as that happens . . . Joy in Heaven!

Amen.