

September 11, 2016 - 17th Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 15:1-10
The Rev. Carenda Baker

It was the beginning of August, 2013, and I was in the process of putting my belongings in storage so that I could rent out my condo while I would be away in Sewanee, Tennessee, completing my Anglican studies year at The School of Theology of The University of the South. The movers came early in the morning on the appointed day to load up the truck with my belongings and take them to the storage unit I had rented.

Sam & Phoebe, my cats were both upstairs, or so I thought, until I went looking for them after the movers had gone. I saw Phoebe, but where was Sam? I called and searched over the whole house, but no Sam, who usually comes trotting out when I call. I had tried to watch the front door while the movers went in and out, but there were periods when the door was wide open – it had to be in order to move stuff to the truck for loading. Sam must have run out without my seeing him, because he moves slick as greased lightning. He had been frightened of the movers, frightened by the noise, and very disturbed that his once comfortable home was being dismantled piece by piece.

I did a quick trip around the condo development calling out – “Sam, Sammy, where are you buddy?” No sign of him. I became more frantic by the minute as there was no sight of or sound from Sam. I called my parents and asked if they would come help me look for Sam.

Around and around the development I went in a big circle calling out, “Sam, Sammy, where are you buddy?” - choking back tears the longer I continued searching. My mother went the opposite direction down the street, stopping neighbors who were outside and asked them if they had seen a Siamese cat anywhere that morning. My father did another sweep of the inside of my now nearly empty home.

Have you ever known that sense of panic and dread, that fear that something precious is gone and you might not be able to get it back? It’s hard work, trying to quell the mounting fear while you try to stay focused and diligent and alert for any sign of the missing one.

After nearly an hour’s time, I met my parents back at the condo, trying to figure out what I should do next. I don’t know why, but I decided to take one more look through the upstairs, though I knew it would be futile. My dear Sam was gone. “Sam, Sammy”. A tiny “meow” came from the direction of the furnace room. There, well hidden and out of view, hunched up in the far corner next to the furnace was Sam. The lost one had been found! And though I was surely rejoicing, Sam was not, and there was no coaxing him out or enticing him with food or treats. He remained in that corner for the rest of the day, still scared and skittish, but thank goodness, safe and at home where he belonged.

In today's gospel, Jesus tells two parables after the Pharisees and scribes grumble about his keeping company with the "lost ones" – those tax collectors and sinners who were being drawn in by Jesus and tending to gather around him.

We need to set the stage properly to understand these parables. Jewish scholar Amy-Jill Levine writes about the context of this parable for 1st century Jewish listeners. "Tax collectors and sinners had not abandoned the law or denied the covenant. The problem with tax collectors is that they were Jews who worked for Rome and would be seen by those in the Jewish community as traitors to their own people. And sinners were not outcasts. They were not cast out of synagogues or the Jerusalem temple. They would be welcomed in such places because those places encourage repentance. The gospels generally present sinners as wealthy people who have not attended to the poor.

So in a 1st century Jewish context, tax collectors and sinners were individuals who had removed themselves from the common good, the common welfare. They looked to themselves rather than to the community. And now they were coming to listen to Jesus. And the scribes and Pharisees, respected, religiously faithful Jewish leaders, are upset that Jesus is reaching out to get these ones who are part of the community – the tax collectors and sinners – but who are living for themselves and their own interests, and not looking out for the community". [Amy-Jill Levine in *Short Stories by Jesus*].

It is rather striking – the way these parables end. They end with an exuberant sense of JOY, and extravagant rejoicing. And the parable of the lost son that follows these two, has a party happening as the story ends.

In the first of these two parables the lost sheep, separated from the 99, is carried home on the shepherd's shoulders. And when he gets home with the lost and now found sheep, the shepherd calls his friends and neighbors and invites them to a party to celebrate with him. And it's not a party to be held in the barn, or out in the sheepfold, but in the house, so you know there was some sort of hospitality shown with food and drink shared among the happy gathering.

And similarly, the woman who has lost one of her ten silver coins, goes all out for the search – lighting the lamps, sweeping, sweeping, back and forth, sweeping the floor looking for her coin. Both the shepherd and the woman experience deep joy in finding, and both share that joy with friends and neighbors.

A second striking and more subtle feature is that in these parables, there is far less attention on what's been lost than on the one who is searching. These stories aren't about a lost sheep or coin, really. They're about a shepherd who risks everything to go seeking, and about a woman who sweeps all night long to find. These stories are about a God who will always go looking for God's lost children, even more fervently than I went looking for my missing cat Sam.

The seekers in these parables, the shepherd and the woman are rather ordinary people who represent God in the stories. And it seems possible that these "ordinary people"

are reminders for us that God often works through ordinary people to do the extraordinary work of helping to find someone lost.

On September 11, 2001 – fifteen years ago today – 24 year old Welles Crowther went to work like every other day to his job as an equities trader in the World Trade Center. After the second tower was hit, the one he was in, Welles led everyone he could find down the steps to safety, and then he went back for more. And after leading more people to safety, he went back again, and again, and again, saving at least five and perhaps more than twelve people before the tower collapsed. On that day, this talented, athletic, good-natured, yet in so many ways ordinary person did an extraordinary thing, giving his life to make sure others could live. On that day, God used Welles Crowther to find people who were lost. One survivor whom Welles helped to safety said, “If he hadn’t come back, I wouldn’t have made it.”

We likely won’t often find ourselves in those kinds of imminent life and death circumstances, yet God does, and will use us in our everyday settings to help find lost ones. At work or in the home of your next door neighbor, someone is lost, cut off from a sense of hope and purpose in life. Among family members and friends – someone is lost in the throes of an addiction, or lost, struggling with a mental illness. Family members become lost to each other through conflict and disagreements and they turn away from each other. Our Thursday morning breakfast guests – some are lost because of their hard living existence on the margins of life, where they cope with homelessness, unemployment, physical disability, and few supports. So the great joy in which we share is that some are experiencing here weekly, a sense of being found and perhaps even a sense of belonging when they come back for the 2nd, 3rd, 10th time. Among folks known to this parish – aren’t there some who might be lost? Lost from feeling a loving connection to their faith community. Lost through disappointment, disagreement, or disillusionment. Lost and unable to believe any longer in the goodness of life, and unable to trust in the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of God.

The events of September 11, 2001 remind us that God regularly uses ordinary people like us to find others. Welles Crowther’s body was found on March 19, 2002, intact with no signs of burns, alongside several firefighters and emergency workers bunched in a suspected command post in the South Tower lobby. Allison Crowther, Welles’ mother said, “We took great peace in knowing that Welles didn’t suffer and that, up until the end, he was being very courageous, doing what he wanted to do. So he must have felt very fulfilled that day, knowing he was helping others”. Jefferson Crowther, Welles’ father said of his son, “He didn’t live long enough to be head of a corporation or do good works or endow a museum. But what he did on September 11th, that’s his legacy.”

We have cause for great joy and celebration, because we have been found by a God who specializes in finding the lost, bringing them home to God, where they - where we - have always belonged. This was the work of Jesus – searching for the lost and bringing them home to God. For you see, being found is about being restored to right relationship with God and neighbor.

Every time we gather for worship, and especially when we share the Eucharist at the Lord's Table, when we hold out our hands to receive Christ's real Presence in bread and wine, we are invited to celebrate with joy, to offer thanks and praise. For we, who were once lost have been found! Strengthened here by Christ's holy presence, we are then sent forth into the world to join God in the work of finding the lost. Ordinary people like us, finding others and creating ever deeper and wider ripples of joy and inclusion and wholeness. The joy of belonging to God's kingdom is meant for us to experience right here and now, because though we are ordinary seekers in this world, we are upheld firmly by an extraordinary God of mercy, forgiveness, and love.

So come, you who have much faith and you who have little, you who have been here often, and you who have not been here for a long time, you who have tried to follow and you who have failed.

Come, it is the Lord – the Lord of the lost and found - who invites us.