

Sermon 9.11.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

Exodus 32:7-14 | 1 Timothy 1:12-17 | **Luke 15:1-10**

Poor Sebastian! Have you seen the signs around Naberth? They've been up for a couple weeks now, announcing that lil' Sebastian, someone's beloved cat, ran away. For a while there was a sign with Sebastian's picture on it everywhere we looked, including on our windshield and stapled to the telephone pole outside the house. Hopefully Sebastian has been found, because I'm sure there are some children who feel heartbroken that their kitty is missing, and parents who are desperate to find him. Losing a pet is awful.

But to be honest – and I'm not particularly proud of this fact – my first reaction to the lost Sebastian poster that was shoved under the church's door was not sadness or empathy. Right underneath Sebastian's name and the words "LOST CAT," it says that the reward for finding Sebastian is \$500. When Dale and I saw that, and I'm not kidding, we thought about closing the church – just locking the doors – to go and find Sebastian. \$500! Annie and I talked about the possibility of getting a similar-sized cat and just spray-painting it orange, though we decided that's probably not the best example to set for our daughter.

\$500! To me, that's an insane amount of money to offer for a lost cat. A ridiculous amount to pay to get your *cat* back. It just didn't make sense to me. Kind of like a shepherd who leaves 99 of his sheep behind, all alone, just so he can go find the one sheep that is lost. Or like a woman who, when she finds money that's been missing, goes and spends more than the money is even worth to celebrate with her neighbors. It just doesn't make sense.

Not to us, anyway. Probably because Sebastian isn't *our* cat that we miss and are desperate to find. And because the missing sheep isn't *our* sheep that we know and love and treasure. From the outside it looks crazy, even foolish, but for Sebastian's owners and the shepherd, it's a small price to pay. And if one of the ways you can tell how *valuable* something is is by what someone is willing to give or pay to get it back, then the point of Jesus' words and these parables this morning is that God is willing to give up *anything* for you.

There's an old hymn that we sometimes here at Holy Trinity sing called, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing." Maybe some of you know it. It's one of my favorite songs, and what always hits me is the third verse, when we sing the words, "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love." It's a confession that we are the sheep in this parable. That we are Sebastian. That we are prone to wander away from God.

It's been a part of who we are ever since Adam and Eve thought they knew better than God and decided to wander off on their own by biting into that apple. It's been a part of who we are ever since the Israelites, who, in our first reading this morning, decided that God wasn't quite enough, and so they made a statue out of gold so they would have something tangible to worship. Before Moses had even wandered back down the mountain with those 10 Commandments, the Israelites had *already* broken the very first one, and so have we, by placing our trust and hope and confidence in things other than God, by putting things in this life before and above God.

We are prone to wander. Prone to reject God's wisdom, to break his commands, to rebel against his love, to wander away from the abundant life that God intends.

Fifteen years ago today, we saw what can happen when humanity wanders away from God and is led astray by sin. I was sitting at my desk in school on September 11<sup>th</sup> when a group of men – who believed they were following God’s will, but who were actually worshipping an idol of their own making – flew planes into buildings with the intent to harm, kill, and terrorize. It was the sinful product of people who were lost and wandering far from God, ensnared by sin and hate and fear. For those of us who are old enough, we remember how that day changed our nation. That night I went to work at a gas station convenience store, and the people who came in felt angry, and scared. But mostly they felt lost. No one knew what was happening, or why, or what we should do. As a whole country, we felt lost.

And feeling lost is awful. We use the word “lost” to describe a lot of different things, some of which are trivial and some of which are gut-wrenching. And there are a lot of ways to feel lost in life. We can feel emotionally lost in our hurt or anger or pain, unsure of what to do or how to get out of the situation we’re in or how to be free of the things that hold us down. We can feel spiritually lost, like our anchor is gone and we’re adrift and God seems far away, and we’re not sure what we believe. Other times we just feel plain *lost*, wondering what we’re supposed to do next or what our purpose is to begin with.

No one likes feeling lost. Sometimes it happens through no fault of our own, because of someone *else’s* decisions or things in life that are outside of our control. Being lost isn’t always your fault, and in those kinds of moments when you feel lost, God is still with you.

But we do have to admit that sometimes being lost *is* our fault, because we have wandered away from God like a sheep that stops following its shepherd. Maybe it’s the substance abuse, or the pornography, or the bitterness you’ve allowed to grow in your heart.

Maybe it's the bad decisions you made, or the lies you've told, the gossip you shared, or the problems you've hidden away that have left you wandering the hills by yourself feeling lost.

It's worth taking time to really think about what it is that tempts *you* to wander. What tempts *you* to leave God, to strike out on your own, to wander away from the life God intends for you and into wrong actions, behavior, and attitudes that hurt you and hurt others? What causes *you* to wander, and how can you repent, turn away, and turn back to God?

You know, this week I learned when a sheep gets lost, usually it becomes so scared that it crawls into the thickest, densest brush it can find or crams itself into the hardest-to-reach place in order to hide. Rather than trying to find their shepherd or at least assisting in the search, instead lost sheep try to shut themselves away from the world, lying down in silence, often getting tangled up or injured, making it even more difficult to be found. Lost sheep usually just end up making it harder for the shepherd to find them.

We're not so different. Every week in worship we confess we are in bondage to sin and unable to free ourselves, we sing that we are prone to wander, we admit we have a need that we cannot meet ourselves. Two thousand years after Jesus told these parables, we still see the evidence of what life is like when we wander off on our own away from God's love and life.

But you can tell the true value of something by what someone is willing to pay to get it back. Do you know how much God loves and cares for you? Do you know how important and valuable *you* are to God? God doesn't love you in some vague, hypothetical, statistical, distant way. God loves you in the same way a shepherd is willing to leave behind 99 sheep in order to find the one who is lost. God loves you like Sebastian's owners, who are willing to pay a ridiculous amount to get him back. God loves *you*, personally.

And if you want to know how valuable you are to God, how much you are treasured, consider that Jesus offered up his very life on a cross, beaten and bruised, condemned and cursed, so that you could be *found* and you could be *free*. God died for you. And if that seems to you like an insane cost to pay, that's only because you're looking at it from the outside. For God it was worth it, beyond a shadow of a doubt, no question, hands down.

You are important to God. Jesus came to *find you*, and he is always searching for the lost, because in Jesus, the lost get found. Being found means that you belong to someone. It means that you're *seen* by someone. It means that you're forgiven and loved just as you are. It means that Jesus is there to help guide you through this life. It means that you are never alone.

Jesus said that when someone who is lost gets found, the appropriate response is to celebrate. And that's what this morning is, a celebration. Today is the first Sunday that everyone is back from summer's vacation and school has started and our fall ministries start again. We decided to call today "Welcome Back" Sunday, because no matter where you are or where you've been wandering, Christ welcomes you to his table, just as he did with those sinners and tax collectors who were considered lost and unworthy in this morning's reading.

Together we are a beautiful flock of lost sheep who have been found by Christ, and today us sheep are celebrating. We're blessing our children and teachers in Jesus' name. We're coming to God's table to receive forgiveness and grace. We're turning away from our wandering and back towards God. We're praying for our Giving Garden to feed those who are hungry. We're throwing a party after worship and breaking bread together. And we're declaring that if we who were lost have been found by Christ, if God is able to find *us* in our wandering,

then there is hope for this world, for God's long-reaching grace and love will have the final word, not violence or terror or hate, and God will not stop searching until *all are found*.

If you've been wandering away from God, know that you don't have to hide, for God loves you and is searching and waiting with open arms to welcome you back. If you feel lost right now, hear that you are seen and loved and not alone. I hope you know that you matter here. You matter to me, and to the people in our church community. Our flock is incomplete without you. If you were away this summer, we missed you, and we feel it when you're gone. Your presence and gifts and faith *matter* for the work that we're going to do together this year as God's people.

So this morning, may you know that you matter.

May you turn back from your wandering.

May you celebrate the redemption that God offers you and offers others.

May you know that *you* are God's Sebastian.

May you be found.

Amen.