

# LOSS AND JOY

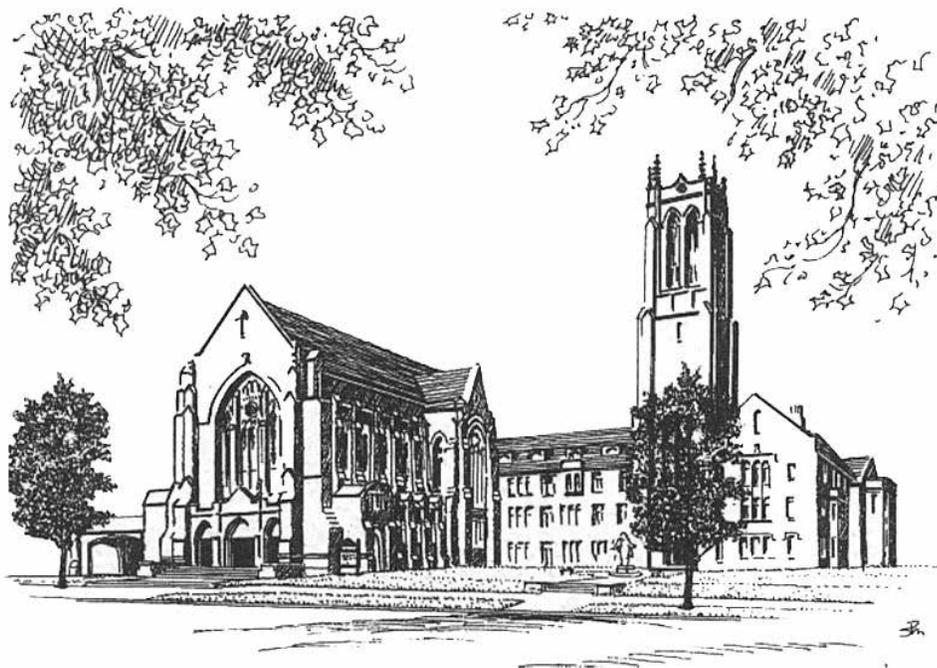
by

Rev. Thomas A. (Tommy) Williams

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*Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost*

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



## ST. PAUL'S

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**Texts:** Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 • Psalm 14 • 1 Timothy 1:12-17 • Luke 15:1-10

## **Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28**

At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem: A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse— a wind too strong for that. Now it is I who speak in judgment against them.

“For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good.”

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger. For thus says the Lord: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end. Because of this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black; for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back.

## **Psalm 14**

Fools say in their hearts, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good.

The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God.

They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.

Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon the Lord?

There they shall be in great terror, for God is with the company of the righteous.

You would confound the plans of the poor, but the Lord is their refuge.

O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion! When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.

## **1 Timothy 1:12-17**

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

## **Luke 15:1-10**

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “Which one 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 he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’

“Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?

“When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

I know we are mindful of the anniversary of this day. Fifteen years ago was of course September 11, 2001. It was a Tuesday that year. Like Sadie, I was a pastoral intern from seminary at the time. My first Sunday at St. Paul’s was just months before when I began on the weekend of Tropical Storm Allison.

I was set to begin a young adult Bible study on Wednesday the 12<sup>th</sup>, which became a session instead for all to express the feelings of that day.

As many remember, our church was packed the following Sunday as people’s right instincts were to be together. We also held services at Wednesday noon, Wednesday night, and Friday noon.

Many are cynical about people running to the church in moments like that and it quickly dissipating. I know it makes us hopeful that the instinct will continue. While I wish people remained, I instead choose to see this as a positive.

In moments of crises people can run away or they can run toward. And if people run toward each other and God in moments of loss, that’s a good thing.

The parables that our Gospel links together are actually three parables of Jesus. We read two of them today. Together with these two is the parable of the wayward son or the prodigal son, as it is often known.

Each story — a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son — all seem to me to describe the varied ways we get lost and the varied ways in which God reclaims what is lost.

I can see it happening — A sheep nibbles at sweet grass, head down, focused on what is right in front of him, ignoring all that is around. Then all of a sudden it is lost, away from the herd. The sheep has chosen to wander but not maliciously.

Sometimes we inch away by degrees from God and each other, then one day find ourselves alone.

I can also imagine the moment of rescue — A shepherd searches and searches, at risk for losing the rest of the sheep and once the shepherd finds that sheep; he picks it up on his shoulders and carries the sheep back home.

It is the way Christian art has depicted this story over the years – the shepherd, or Jesus himself, carrying the sheep around his neck.

Once I was called upon to preach for the memorial service of the son of a member of my church. Through a series of difficult and destructive decisions related to alcohol, this son died. He walked, intoxicated, into oncoming traffic one day.

No one disputed that it was not his intent to die this way, but a series of choices led to this tragic moment.

Praying and praying through what scriptural text could be read and preached from in this service led me to this one and the image in front of us today — that for this lost one — I can imagine Jesus gathering him from a lost place and taking him upon himself and doing the work to carry him home.

And then there is the story of the wayward prodigal son who chose to leave and chose to return home. That will preach another day.

But the coin — the lost coin — this one seems different to me. A coin has no agency, a coin does not choose to be lost. A coin is dropped, forgotten, laid aside... not by God but by life and outside evils.

And still, the woman looks and looks until at last she has found the coin.

A lot of people have coins laying around the floor of their lives — relationships set aside and lost, neglected dreams, forgotten commitments that you just sort of let slip away.

Being 15 years ago, the lectionary on the Sunday following after 9/11 were the same readings we have today.

I went back and read my predecessor Jim Bankston's sermon from that day, "The Seeker God."

In it, he extended the metaphor of God as the shepherd and the woman to the laborers, police, firefighters, and volunteers desperately seeking the lost in the rubble and chaos of that day's destruction.

Do you know anyone who might be praying for the return of something they have lost?

A marriage, health, a child, a pregnancy, a lost limb in battle, lost youth, job.

Many people have coins hidden in corners on the floor of their lives.

There are lots of really different things we can lose in life. Check out this list. We can lose Direction...Faith...Faculties...Friend...Focus...Ground...Hair...Hope...Heart to someone...Head...Keys...Mind...Mobility...Perspective...Respect...Spark...Teeth...Temper...Touch...

People have lost all kinds of things. Every day is an anniversary of something for somebody and often of something lost.

I wonder what might be lost that needs to be found in your life?

What have we collectively lost together that needs to be rediscovered — as a church, or a city or a nation and world?

Sometimes when you lose something, it's a good strategy to retrace your steps and find the spot where you lost it.

Revisit the mall stores where you might have left your credit card. The sink where you took off your wedding band and put in on the soap dish. Retrace your steps.

Where did you place your devotional or prayer time with God in favor of a crammed calendar?

Where did we temporarily misplace our compassion for the poor and start getting compassion fatigue?

Where did we let our generosity start slipping and start holding on too tightly to our money?

Where did you let your eyes start looking at stuff you shouldn't look at?

Or buy into stereotypes for people that are not right?

Retrace those steps...

Or what about the collective WE. What have WE lost?

Lots of coins are rolling around on the global floor these days — innocent children and people in Syria and North Korea, who are the forgotten casualties of

elite power struggles. Babies cradled in mothers' arms, family cafes lost forever, future hopes diminished. These are some lost coins in the corner of our world.

Close to home are our own children who do not have schools in their neighborhood with the resources they need, neighborhoods that do not have the fresh food they need, healthcare options. These some of the lost coins rolling around on the floor of our city.

The parables coupled together today require us to bounce back and forth between their varying implications for repentance and life with God.

Often times, it is us out looking for precisely the wrong things, nibbling sweet grass.

And then we get found and it's pure grace.

I'm thinking about St. Mother Theresa this week as she has now become a saint in our catholic Christian tradition.

She looked after many lost ones over the course of her long life, cast aside coins on the floors of our world.

You might say she is a good divine image of the woman who searches and searches for the lost coin.

St. Theresa was known to say that "the greatest disease in the West today is not tuberculosis or leprosy. (*We might add, that the greatest disease isn't actually Zika.*) The greatest disease is being unwanted, unloved, uncared for. We can try to cure or treat physical diseases with medicine (or manage pain) but the only cure for loneliness, despair and hopelessness is love. Love born of reconciliation between God and the lost."

Sometimes it's stuff we've done, sometimes it's wandering, sometimes we've been forgotten in the corner.

We can't pass by these parables without understanding the message of repentance in these stories of loss and return.

Rabbi Elizar, early centuries AD - Why don't you repent one day before your death?

How do I know when that day comes?

All the more the reason to repent today!

At the conference we hosted here in July were encounters of loss and joy that blew me away. The conference gathered social workers, lawyers, judges, those formerly incarcerated, and policy makers for speakers and sessions dedicated to finding faithful ways for rehabilitating those who have done something illegal and ways of reintegrating returning citizens into our city.

In one session, a formerly incarcerated man, now a social worker, stood up and apologized for the crime he committed and then told us he wanted to be part of solutions now. The room erupted in applause as a judge and member of this church walked across the room to embrace this man.

You could only describe this moment as heavenly joy.

Another moment came just after a policy panel I moderated on justice reform.

One panelist sits on the highest Criminal Appeals Court in Texas. We hired a videographer to work the conference who was formerly incarcerated himself and as he saw her enter he recognized her as the judge who had sentenced him to many years in prison.

After the panel she was leaving when he approached her and told her who he was and what crime he committed and so forth. With tears in her eyes she said, if I knew then what I know now about rehabilitation and redemption, I would have approached your sentence differently.

And they embraced in only a way that God working through the church can do, eliciting what could only be described as heavenly joy.

So we work at being good shepherds and women and men who search for the lost ones. We strive to be more like Jesus. But be assured, sisters and brothers, that when your energy is all used up and gone, that's okay too. Just lie in the corner and God will find you. God will retrieve *you*, too.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Most Sunday sermons also are available via the church website, [www.stpaulshouston.org](http://www.stpaulshouston.org), as well as pre-printed and on CD. Access the sermons on the website via either the Worship section or the Media Center. The pre-printed sermons are in the information rack at the Jones Plaza entrance to the Sanctuary Building. To order a \$5 CD of the complete worship service, contact Phyllis Brockermeier at 713-528-0527 or [pbrock@stpaulshouston.org](mailto:pbrock@stpaulshouston.org).