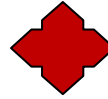


Lost American Christianity

The 16th Sunday after Pentecost



September 12, 2010

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

What does it mean to be lost?

Each of today's readings from our holy scripture touch on this question. The prophet Jeremiah thunders with the dismay of God over the people of Jerusalem who have lost their way in their relationship with God. Foolish. Stupid. Having no understanding. Knowing only how to do evil, knowing nothing about how to do good.

The psalmist sees the fool who says there is no God. And again – no one who does any good. Everyone faithless. Not a single person who does good.

In the 1st Letter to Timothy Paul is described as a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. Someone who does no good whatsoever.

Lost, lost, lost. A people and an apostle lost from their true selves. Lost from their neighbors. Lost, it would seem, from God. Each of these threads are brought together by Luke, both in the setting and in the story telling from this morning's Gospel.

We find Jesus in the familiar setting of a meal.

As we travel with Luke this year through the life of Jesus and especially on this final journey to Jerusalem, Jesus is found more and more often at a meal, and in the company of those styled as sinners.

Luke has a special place in his story telling for sinners – perhaps that is why so many of us feel at home in this gospel.

In our story today Jesus hears the Pharisees & scribes as they grumble about his relationship with these sinners, and so he tells them a couple of stories. Stories that tell us something about what it means to be lost. Stories that tell us something about what it means to be sought for. Stories that tell us something about what it means to be found.

It has been difficult-to-impossible these past few weeks to observe the current state of American Christianity and not fear that it has become lost. By American Christianity I mean that curious melding of Christianity and patriotism that manifests itself from time to time in the story of our nation. This sadly, to my way of thinking, appears to be one of those times.

A portion of the Christian community in our country has lost their way. Lost in their relationships with their neighbors. And, so far as it appears to me, lost in their relationship with God.

They have so lost their way that they confuse their citizenship in the Kingdom of God with their patriotism.

They have so lost their way that they brand all of Islam as a hate-filled religion that is bent on destruction.

They have so lost their way that the construction of an Islamic Center in lower Manhattan has been perverted into a tool of xenophobia, religious bigotry, and for political gain.

They have so lost their way that they forget that children of God who adhere to the Islamic faith were among the innocent victims who died in the Twin Towers: some who were at work that day, and some who were among the police, fire and other first-responders who died that day.

They forget that among the innocent passengers on the AA flight that went down in Pennsylvania were people of the Muslim faith.

They have so lost their way that burning copies of the Quran seems appropriate to them. Terry Jones received hundreds of Qurans, from across America – sent to him by practitioners of what I call American Christianity – who wanted to add to the bonfire of burning books.

Lost. Lost. Lost.

Lost in their relationship with their neighbors. And, so far as it appears to me, lost in their relationship to the God that we know in the person of Jesus Christ.

Now for the hardest question of all: what does God call us to do, in response?

It is soooooo easy to set back and be self-righteous.

Those of us who inhabit the liberal, progressive, modernist, inclusive, tolerant branch of the Episcopal Church are very much at risk. We – and I count myself very much in this camp – we are at risk of becoming like the Pharisees and the scribes: all too prone to grumble about all of those ‘other people’ who are sinners. We are at risk of becoming lost ourselves.

When we choose to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, we will have to go places we probably don’t want to go, and seek out people with whom we probably don’t want to hang out.

The radical hospitality that we speak of around here calls us to have a dinner party with Terry Jones down in Florida. Our radical hospitality calls us to break bread with Glenn Beck over on Fox News. We are called to share a meal with Sarah Palin, somewhere overlooking Russia.

What did we hear in the Gospel today?

We heard that there is joy in heaven and among the angels when what was once lost is found. Jeremiah’s prophecy included a small nugget of a hopeful future. Easily lost in the litany of woe and waste and desolation that

awaits Jerusalem is the almost throw-away line: *God says: yet I will not make a full end.*

The destroying armies did arrive. Jerusalem was sacked. Exile in Babylon lasted more than a generation. But a people who were once lost found themselves again, and did return, their relationship with God restored.

Even as the Psalm laments the evildoers who do not know God, we hear that, at the last day, God is their refuge. Again, a people who were lost, will be found again.

Even that old rascal Paul – once a blasphemer, once a persecutor of the followers of Jesus, once a man of violence – even Paul experienced the mercy of a God who was not content that a single person should remain lost.

A message that arches over and throughout all the stories of our faith is that the God we worship is one who is revealed as having mercy. And there is no shortage of that mercy. Because I need a share of it – and so do each of you.

No matter how lost we may have become, God responds with an abundance of mercy that is unexpected. Mercy that is so abundant as to seem unreasonable. Mercy that restores us even when we have been lost in our relationships with our true selves, lost in our relationships with our neighbors, and even when we have been lost in our relationship with God.

I once was lost, but now am found.

Thanks be to God.

Extracts from the Prayers of the People on this day:

We pray especially today for those who died in Washington, D.C., New York City & in Pennsylvania as a result of the acts of hatred and terror on September 11, 2001. We pray for those who knew and loved them, let us pray to the Lord saying: **Lord, have mercy.**

We pray for your children of the Muslim faith who experience bigotry, hatred, and even violence at the hands of those who profess to be Christians, let us pray to the Lord saying: **Lord, have mercy.**

We pray that your commandment that “we love our neighbor as ourselves” will become more and more a hallmark of our relationships with those who know you differently, and less the exception, let us pray to the Lord saying: **Lord, have mercy.**

We pray your forgiveness for the angry words, the hateful speech and actions, the burning of another’s scriptures, and the violent personal attacks that have overtaken a portion of American Christianity, let us pray to the Lord saying: **Lord, have mercy.**

May your peace that surpasses all understanding enter the hearts of those who call themselves Christians, and yet would do violence in your name, let us pray to the Lord saying: **Lord, have mercy.**

For our sisters and brothers of the Jewish faith, we rejoice with them in the celebration of Rosh Hashanah. May the Shalom of the God of Abraham & Sarah, Isaac & Rebekah, and Jacob, Leah & Rachel become a reality in their lives in this New Year. Let us pray to the Lord saying: **Lord, have mercy.**



For our brothers and sisters of the Islamic faith, we wish them *Eid Mubarak* at the end of Ramadan. May the Salam of Allah become a reality in their lives. Let us pray to the Lord saying: **Lord, have mercy.**