

Until God Finds Us
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Luke 15:1-10

I heard of a preacher who became irritated by a church member who consistently slept through his sermons. It didn't matter how eloquent or relevant his words were, this guy would nod off during the introductory paragraph, and wouldn't wake up until the organ sounded the notes of the final hymn. One Sunday the preacher decided to do something about it. He started his sermon, and half-way into it, calmly said, "Everyone who wants to go to heaven, stand up." The entire congregation rose up, except the sleeping church member. When they had all settled back down into their pews, the preacher shouted at the top of his voice, "Everyone who wants to go to hell, stand up!" This startled the dozing man awake, and he jumped up, looked around to see what was going on, and then said to the prematurely smug minister, "I don't know what we're voting on, but it looks like you and I are the only ones in favor of it."

Saints and sinners. In the biblical tradition, the two get all mixed up. Uncomfortably often, the sinners get the last laugh, and the saints get their come-uppance. The last are first, and the mighty are brought low. The wise are stymied, and out of the mouth of babes comes truth. Jesus himself exemplified this paradox; he ate with sinners and was scorned by religious leaders. He welcomed the poor, the outcast, those with questionable morals, women and children, and foreigners with heretical beliefs. The righteous were appalled. What's happening to our community? He's letting practically anyone in! People who don't live by the rules....people who don't have the right beliefs...people who are voting for Hell, and will most likely get there.

Who are the saints and who are the sinners? Who's in and who's out? There's a reason for this confusion, which Jesus reveals in our morning scripture text. Listen for God's word to the church in the reading from the gospel according to Luke in the fifteenth chapter at the first verse. [Luke 15:1-10]

We're no longer #1, folks. The latest study by the National Opinion Research Center reports that by the end of this year, Protestants will make up less than 50 percent of the population. After almost four centuries of numerical predominance, we are about to become a minority in the United States. The same study showed that the proportion of Roman Catholics in the population has remained stable at 25 percent, and the overwhelming majority of Americans continue to identify themselves as Christian.

So what has happened? Broad research suggests that the growing population subset is the group that declares no religious affiliation. People are dropping out of churches, and young people who take their typical leave of absence are not returning as they used to. [*as reported in the Christian Century, August 24, 2004, p. 3*] A mantra I've heard often from contemporary adults to explain why they can't be found in church is *I'm spiritual, but not religious* (though I am tempted to tell them that if it's organized religion they find objectionable, they could be at home here: "organized" not always being the first adjective I'd use to describe us!).

The gospel reading today has a word for the conventionally religious, and for the uncommitted. And lo and behold, it's the same word: God is looking for you. In the stories Jesus told, God is depicted as a shepherd who leaves the 99 in search of the one lost sheep, and as a woman who lights a lamp, sweeps the floor, and searches carefully until she finds a single coin that is missing. God is shown to be the Seeker, the One who comes looking for us, who is the subject—not the object---of our search. We may identify ourselves as seekers, or describe our quest as "church shopping," but it really isn't God who is hiding from us. God isn't buried in a clothing rack,

or way at the back of a high shelf, waiting to be discovered by the smart and persistent shopper. God risks the righteous in pursuit of the lost. God goes to great lengths to recover the missing. God is looking for you and me and for many others who aren't like us at all.

In both stories, there is great rejoicing when the lost is found, a joy compared to that which takes place in heaven when a sinner repents. But the emphasis really isn't on repentance here, but on the rejoicing. Both the shepherd and the woman, having found what they were looking for, call their neighbors together to celebrate. I think Jesus is reminding the Pharisees and the scribes that the party was taking place in the table with Jesus and the sinners; they would miss it if they refused to come to it.

These parables raise a question we church folk might not want to consider: will we join the party when God celebrates the return of someone not like us, who by our standards is not worthy of God's attention and mercy? It's a funny thing about being lost: sometimes you know you are, and other times you don't. Maybe it's a little easier to be "found" when you see yourself as "lost." The grumbling religious leaders separated themselves from the life of the party by imagining that they were beyond the need for mercy. Their merit is what mattered. Friends, we are more in danger of being lost than the ones outside our doors if we see our church as a haven of privilege, rather than a sanctuary for sinners.

Groucho Marx famously claimed he would not be a member of an organization that deemed him worthy of membership. The gospel declares that we are not worthy of membership in the Body of Christ, *but we are invited to join anyway*. God's mercy is extended to all, but only those who see the universal need for mercy can receive it themselves. In God's house grace is the rule. [R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9, pp. 294-98] The rule of grace addresses the question of who are "the lost." This past summer the General Assembly of our denomination chose not

to withhold funding of a so-called messianic synagogue—a mission project of a Philadelphia church designed to convert Jews to Christianity. The failure to do so has understandably caused strains in our interfaith relationships, and has raised questions with our Jewish friends. The Presbyterian perspective has long been one of deep respect for the Jewish religion with whom we share a common religious heritage and covenant. The great commission which sends us out to make disciples seems to me to be primarily concerned with those who have not found a path to God, who live apart from relationship with the Divine. With Jewish brothers and sisters, we join hands to work for justice and peace, without insisting first that they embrace our Christian savior.

Fairmount's new logo depicts the front door of our church building, wide open: a visible symbol of our intent to be a welcoming, inclusive faith community. This morning I'd like us to break a time-honored rule in order to get a sense of how we're doing. That rule is the one where you're not supposed to turn around to see who else is here? Today I invite you to look to your left, and to your right, and behind you, [and up in the balcony where the choir sits]. Get a good look; stand up if it improves your line of vision. See who is here? We're seekers and questioners, and people with more doubt than Thomas. We're imperfect in our actions, and sometimes petty in our speech. Our outward appearance masks heartache, fear, tiredness, and stress. We don't know the Bible, we forget to pray, and truth be told, sometimes we'd rather be on the golf course or at the ball park, than sitting in church. But maybe we come here, drawn by the God who is seeking us. The God who says, "wherever you go, I will find you. I want to be with you, and you with me."

Now look around again, but this time look for the ones who *aren't* here. Is it possible that there are others who need to know the God who searches out the lost?—who is determined to show mercy to everyone.—who loves without reason and without measure.—whose love saves them; who saves us all. The grace of our logo is that the door opens both ways. Yes, it

is open toward the street, to welcome all who enter. But it is also an open door out from the sanctuary, from the safety and certainty of this place, into the wild, dangerous complexity of this sweet and terrible world. We are sent out from here to join God on a search mission for the lost, the lonely, those who struggle to find purpose and place. Let us go, not as grumbling saints but as forgiven sinners, who in our need have become part of a community, have discovered a purpose, have found our heart's true home.

O THE DEPTHS OF THE RICHES AND WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOD! HOW UNSEARCHABLE ARE GOD'S JUDGMENTS AND HOW INSCRUTABLE GOD'S WAYS! FOR FROM GOD AND THROUGH GOD AND TO GOD ARE ALL THINGS. TO GOD BE GLORY FOREVER. AMEN.

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