
The Rev. Ann Camber's Sermon from her last Sunday as St. Paul's 'Deacon Associate' ~ September 11th

Message for St. Paul's, September 11, 2022:

"Lost And Found"

Good Morning!

I am pleased to preach in St. Paul's pulpit for my last week before I assume the incumbency of *Gathering Table*. I imagine that most of you, like me have found this a challenging week, first tracking and grieving the tragic and awful events in Saskatchewan where a very disturbed man shattered a first nations community *James Smith Cree Nation*, killing 11 and injuring many more, and the subsequent days-long manhunt for a murderer, and thankfully the authorities were able to track him down before he caused more harm and the healing has begun. Then on Thursday we heard of the death of our sovereign **HRH Queen Elizabeth** after a 70-year reign, and the accession of **King Charles III** to the throne. The days ahead will afford us opportunities to grieve and to process this week in our country and world.



It is also a bittersweet day for me because while I am excited about the calling I have to the parish of *Gathering Table*, at the same time I am leaving *St. Paul's*, my home church. I still will be here on Saturday afternoons, and I am still close by, but my focus will be on the community where God has called me to serve. I want to say thank you all because without you I would not be in this position of fulfilling a purpose that I have had on my heart since I was 12 years old. I have worshipped with you for 10 years. I want to say thanks to **Archdeacon Deborah** who is my mentor, **Deacon Anne** and **Father Gordon**, the great Wardens over the years, all my wonderful 5 pm Service family, my Lay Reader friends, **Dr. Sean Kim** who gives me my classical organ fix when I attend Sunday services and **'The Ambassadors' Praise Band** who really are like my second family. I want to encourage everyone here ~ I have attended many churches in my life, this church, *St Paul's*, is the healthiest and happiest church I have ever attended. Never take that gift for granted. We have such a significant role in the spiritual health of our city and in the community and diocese. *St. Paul's* has been a key part of my preparation for priestly ministry, and I will forever be thankful for my years among you.

Now to the real message: Whenever I have been asked about my theological base during all these years of preparation, I go back to one phrase from my Narrative theology class readings. A noted theologian **Dr. Eckland** of this school of theology, located at *Yale University* coined this phrase: **"Learn the Story, Master the Story, Live the Story."** As we learn and study the Scriptures and practice the teachings here in this hothouse of faith and then put them into practice in our world ~ our homes, workplace, school, and community. Then we are fulfilling our baptismal calling as disciples. So, let's take a few minutes to delve into a familiar passage: the Parable of The Lost Sheep and the Parable of The Lost Coin. These two parables are meant to be interpreted alongside the parable immediately after, The Prodigal Son.

Now I have heard this passage taught in several ways, all worth applying to our lives. The first focusing on the loving and affirming message of the promise that God will seek out lost ones never giving up, seeking the one lost sheep even leaving behind the rest to search, or in the case of the woman and the coins, how great energy was expended to find a lost coin or treasure. I remember this phrase from some preachers ~ *"if you were the only one on earth, Jesus would have come and died for you."* It also has the wonderful message that when a lost one is found and repents, there is a great celebration in heaven. I like that! To think that the angels have a party when someone is restored is fun and it shows how much God values each one of us. There is truth and merit to these thoughts about Jesus and his love, but I want us to look at another way to focus on the text. For this, let's look at the context of the passage.

The very first words of the passage are this:

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

So he told them this parable ~ then he launched into his teaching.

There is a second group needing to hear the teachings of Jesus: the Pharisees and scribes. They didn't acknowledge that; they rejected the notion they needed Jesus to teach them . . . but they did.

Jesus was spending his time with tax collectors and sinners. He was going to their homes, eating with them, having discussions with them. He treated them with love and care and respect that most others wouldn't give, so they came to him. In the society of Jesus' day, it would be scandalous for religious leaders to associate with these folk. Tax collectors were considered traitors and collaborators with the Roman occupiers. They were excluded from worship at the synagogue, shunned and universally hated. Many used their position to steal from their neighbours. “Sinners” was a broad label to lump together prostitutes, criminals, people who didn't follow Judaism, and Gentiles. To the Pharisees and scribes, even though they were the spiritual shepherds of Israel, they considered sinners expendable and they were critical of Jesus for daring to associate with them.

So, Jesus countered their criticism with these parables. The parable was addressed to the Pharisees and scribes as a corrective. What was he trying to teach them? In the first parable about the lost sheep, he taught that even those who seem the farthest away from being part of the flock, who wander off into the craggy dangerous places, they are worth having the shepherd of our lives search for, find and restore them, and even prioritizing them over the more mainstream part of the flock. Yet these Pharisees and scribes were loath to connect with these outcasts and sinners, let alone try to restore them, which would be the primary desire of the loving God they serve.



When I attended seminary, we had a number of foreign students. One of my classmates was **Daniel Zapoala**. He is now a pastor in Lethbridge. Now Daniel was from *Burkina Fasso* and his story illustrates how lost ones can be saved and found, to later be used by God. Daniel was born in a tribal family and his father had many wives; he was one of 35 siblings. Unfortunately, Daniel's mother died when he was only four and he was placed with another one of the wife's families. This mother rejected the young boy and mistreated him and refused to feed him, so he ran away. Daniel became a child of the streets. He was like those pictures of young boys, with a swollen belly from malnourishment. But God in his mercy connected Daniel with a Canadian missionary family, they clothed and fed Daniel and then found his father and asked permission to have him attend school at the mission. Daniel was so bright that despite his early deprivation he graduated high school; he found he had a gift for preaching and the missionaries began allowing him to preach as a young teenager. He then came to Canada and earned his bachelor's and master's degrees.

While in seminary Daniel had an interesting habit. Our mature student housing complex where I lived was next to the roughest bar in the city of Regina; motorcycle gang members, prostitutes, and criminals would congregate there. Daniel would once or twice a week go into the bar and sit down with the folks at the bar, and he would order a soft drink. He would listen the stories of the patrons of the bar and share about his life in Africa and how God rescued him. Lives were changed; Daniel knew what it meant to be abandoned on the streets. Daniel knew to go and seek the lost. Even now Daniel as a pastor (until the pandemic), would take a trip every two years with members of his Canadian

congregation to *Burkina Fasso* to do ministry in his home country. He would intentionally go to the streets where a Canadian missionary couple found him and saved his life. He was found and he wanted to bring that same gift to others.

This is the message that Jesus wanted to convey to the scribes and Pharisees ~ those who think they have their faith all together. It is important to God to seek out and connect with those on the margins ~ they matter to God just as much as a lost sheep mattered to the shepherds of their time. Tax Collectors and sinners are on God's heart. They were worth the energy and effort to find that treasured coin, just like the woman in the parable who searched and searched for the lost coin.

We don't know the plans God has for a lost one, but they have value and dignity. Imagine if those Canadian missionaries had looked at that young swollen-bellied African boy and looked the other way. Daniel is sure he wouldn't have lived.

Let's return to the theology statement I mentioned earlier ~

Learn the story, practice the story, live the story. This story challenges us.



What have we learned? ~ That Jesus doesn't view anyone as beyond help, as too damaged to reach, as unworthy of our welcome and connection. He intentionally spent time with anyone who sought him out. To avoid those on the margins is not the way Jesus wants his followers to live.

What can we practice? ~ We can make visitors and newcomers welcome in our churches, make efforts to connect, to demonstrate respect and love for those who may seem unlovable. We can get involved in ministries like our *Blessing Box* or *Shelter House* that connect with those on the margins.

How can I live in this story? ~ I can live as Jesus would desire ~ with an eye to watching out for the poor, the sick, the refugee, the homeless, those with addictions or other issues in their lives, and to not succumb to the biases or judgments that we all wittingly or unwittingly practice. We must be willing to befriend people even if they make us feel uncomfortable ~ at first. I have, in my therapy practice, worked with people who because of great trauma found themselves classified as an outcast or sinner. Yet many of them, because of the care of family, friends, or someone who invests Christ's love in them turns their life around. They get healed, get off the drugs, they restore relationships, they stop finding themselves in trouble with the law. That is all possible and we have the best answer in the Gospel of Christ.

So, my challenge to each of us is to use our 'Jesus eyes' and make an effort to connect with a lost sheep or sweep our house for that person who is a lost treasure. Each of us have had times in our lives where we feel lost to some extent. Let's be that light in the darkness, that one who binds up wounds, that one who shows kindness. Not only they, but we will be blessed in that ministry.

Amen.

REVEREND ANN +

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[now Rector, *Gathering Table*]
