

## Proper 19 (C)

Lk 15.1-10

The message of this morning's gospel is as simple as it is profound: it is not we who seek God, it is God who seeks us. Getting our heads around that truth can be a bit of a challenge, but ordering our lives in a way that bears witness to that truth can be even more of a challenge.

From the beginning of the Bible to the end of the Bible, we see this theme repeated over and over again: it is not we who seek God, it is God who seeks us. Go back all the way to the opening chapters of the book of Genesis, and you'll find a story that is intended to communicate this truth: after they eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve realize they have made a mistake, and they hide themselves from God. And God comes looking for them: Adam and Eve hide in the garden, and God calls out, "Where are you?" God is determined not to allow the good creation he has made to fall into darkness, so God goes in search of his wayward creatures.

As the story of the Bible continues to unfold, one of the things that happens is that human beings get better and better at hiding from God. Sometimes we try and find refuge in civilization and culture; we seek to escape God by investing ourselves in efforts to remake the world in our own image. But eventually God finds us, and when he does all our projects are thrown into disarray because they are exposed for what they are: attempts to hide from God. The story of the tower of Babel is a good example of what happens when we try to hide from God in our efforts to remake the world.

Sometimes we try and find refuge in wisdom and learning; we attempt to escape God by dedicating ourselves to understanding all things and discerning the mysteries of life. We try to discern what will bring us real happiness in this life, and then we relentlessly pursue those things that we think will satisfy us. But eventually God finds us, and when he does all our wisdom appears to us as so much foolishness. The book of Ecclesiastes is a good example of what happens when we try and hide from God by trying to make sense of the world apart from God.

Sometimes—here's the most subtle and the most dangerous trap of all—sometimes we try to hide from God by being religious. We dedicate ourselves to good works, we practice a pure and wholesome lifestyle, we try really hard to follow a blameless course, and we say that we do it all because of our love for God. But eventually God finds us, and when he does all our self-righteousness is revealed to be self-centered idolatry. The testimony of the prophets is a good example of what happens when we try and hide from God by being religious.

This last example—trying to hide from God by being religious—seems to have been the problem Jesus was trying to address in the story told in today's gospel. Jesus is hanging out with the wrong sort, and it gets him into trouble with those who considered themselves to be good, faithful people. But Jesus tells them a few stories that are intended to make the point that it is not we who seek God, it is God who seeks us. Our efforts to be righteous people, our efforts to impress God with our piety or to earn salvation through our good works, these things count for nothing when they are considered in light of God's determination to find us and to save us.

Now, we have to be a little careful here, because it can be easy to misinterpret what's actually going on in this story. One way of misinterpreting this story would be to conclude that Jesus liked sinners and tax collectors but he didn't like Pharisees and scribes; we may think God likes sinners and tax collectors because they're "real people," but he doesn't like Pharisees and scribes because they're hypocrites. I don't think that's right. That interpretation puts the emphasis on *us*, and not on God; it misses the point Jesus is trying to make.

In other words, that kind of an interpretation makes the same mistake that the Pharisees and the scribes made: the Pharisees and the scribes assumed that God liked them better than he liked the sinners and the tax collectors. "We're Pharisees and scribes; we work hard to be righteous, we're not at all like those tax collectors and sinners who don't observe the law. Of course God likes us better!" We hear that in this story, and it sounds to us like self-righteous hypocrisy, and it is self-righteous hypocrisy.

But it would also be self-righteous hypocrisy for the sinners and tax collectors to say, "We're sinners and tax collectors; we're honest, real-world, hard-working people, not at all like those self-righteous, hypocritical Pharisees and scribes. Of course God likes us better!" One of the best ways to camouflage one's own hypocrisy is to accuse someone else of being a hypocrite.

But the point of the parables that Jesus tells is not that God likes one group of people better than another group of people. The point of the parables is that, regardless of who we are—tax collector or sinner, Pharisee or scribe—God is looking for us. God has gone in search of his wayward creatures, and regardless of how far we wander or where we try and hide, one day God will find us. It is never a question of if, it is only ever a question of when. The only uncertainty has to do with how we will respond when God eventually finds us.

Do you remember the advice your parents gave you when you were a child regarding what you should do if you ever find yourself to be lost? I used to go for long walks in the woods around our home, and my mother was always worried about me getting lost. Sometimes we'd go to the city and I'd go off and wander around by myself for a while, and that would make her nervous, too. So she told me, "If you ever get lost, stop wandering around and stay in one place. Don't try to find us; we'll find you." My guess is that some of you heard this same advice from your parents.

I never did get lost, either wandering around the woods or walking around the city, although that may come as a surprise to my wife, who knows how good I am at following directions. I never got lost, but I remembered the advice: "If you ever get lost, stop wandering around and stay in one place. Don't try to find us; we'll find you."

There's a very important spiritual principle in that bit of advice. We may find ourselves to be lost in any number of circumstances: we may be walking in the woods, or may be wandering around an unfamiliar city, or we may be trying to keep up the pace in a life that never seems to slow down, or we may even unexpectedly find ourselves walking in the valley of the shadow of death. In any of those situations, our first response is going to be to want to do something. We panic; we try to retrace our steps, or we try to reassure ourselves that we're not really lost, or we begin wandering around in circles to the point that we begin to despair we'll ever find our way

again.

In those situations, oftentimes the hardest thing to do is to stop and to be still. Staying in one place only makes sense if you believe that someone will come for you; if you think nobody's coming, or if you worry that nobody's even going to notice that you're missing, then you're likely to keep wandering around, getting yourself more lost with every step you take.

But if you believe that someone is looking for you, if you know that there is someone who knows the lay of the land better than you do, if you know that there is someone who cares about you too much to wait for you to figure out your own way home, then you just may find the courage and the patience to stop and to wait.

When you stop and wait, you're much more likely to listen: you listen for the sound of someone approaching, you strain to hear the voice of someone calling your name. All of these things are acts of faith: when we stop, when we are still, when we are silent, we place ourselves in a position of trust.

We are not encouraged to do any of these things in today's world. We are not encouraged to stop; instead, we are encouraged to go, to keep moving, to keep plowing ahead regardless of the cost and regardless of whether or not we even know where we're going. We are not encouraged to be still; instead, we are encouraged to be distracted, to keep ourselves constantly stimulated, to find reassurances that the life we're living is meaningful. We are not encouraged to be silent; we are encouraged to make our voices heard, to speak up for ourselves, to draw attention to ourselves.

In other words, life in today's world is increasingly organized around the assumption that there is no one looking for us. There is no one coming to find us, no one who knows the lay of the land better than we do, no one who cares about us more than we care for ourselves. In that kind of a world, things like stillness, and silence, and faith, and hope make very little sense. Better to keep moving.

Today's gospel tells us that there is another way. Today's gospel reminds us that there is someone who is looking for us, and in the person of Jesus Christ he has already found us. In Jesus, we see God's search for humanity fulfilled, and we see humanity's search for God fulfilled. In Jesus, God rejoices for having found us, and he lays us on his shoulder and brings us home. In Jesus, we find that we are able to make our home in the life of God because we find that God has made his home among us. That is the truth of this morning's gospel, and it is a truth that is as simple as it is profound.

If you're feeling a bit lost this morning, maybe a bit confused and tired, a bit worn down from wandering around without being sure where you're going, then today's gospel is for you. If you're feeling a bit like a sinner or a tax collector, not really accepted or respected in the eyes of society and wondering if you really have any right to be here, then this morning's gospel is for you. And if you're feeling a bit like a Pharisee or a scribe, believing that you have every right to be here and thinking how much better this place would be if everyone were more like you, then this morning's gospel is most definitely for you.

Regardless of where we are or how far we have wandered, it is the living God who seeks us. Let us stop and be still and be silent so that he might find us, and lay us across his shoulder, and bring us home rejoicing.

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