

The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost – 2022

Ezekiel 34:11-24

1 Timothy 1:5-17

Luke 15:1-10

Adam was lost. Adam had fallen down a ravine that he could not climb out of. Adam's mind raced. All he could envision was judgment, harsh and well-deserved judgment. Most people don't think well when they are panicked. For the most part, it's not physical danger that puts us in a panic. It's not that the house is on fire or that your son is bleeding profusely from a wicked laceration or that your spouse is clearly choking at the dinner table, unable to breathe. What puts us in a panic is personal failure. What puts us in a panic is sin, sin that we don't want exposed.

I've got some experience with this. As a young lad I was a juvenile delinquent. I was caught regularly. When I was caught, I don't remember *ever* telling the truth. Why is that? Of course, I was an idiot; self-absorbed, entitled, profoundly lost. Lies were the currency of my mouth, my heart. Why did I lie? Because it seemed easier than telling the truth. Because the truth was a wretched business. The truth was that I was a felon, an addict, and a loser – profoundly lost. Adam draped his body with fig leaves. I draped my conversation with lies. And God came looking for both of us.

Adam, "where are you?" (Genesis 3:9). I've been rattled plenty of times in my life but probably never like that. Guilt, shame, panic enveloped the man created from the dust of the earth. "I heard you in the Garden and I was afraid. I hid myself because I was naked" (Genesis 3:10). None of this is news to God – He was quite aware. God opens the door to confession to see if Adam will humble himself and speak the truth. "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (Genesis 3:11). How does Adam reply? Does he confess his sin or does he engage in some useless self-justifying jive? "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree and I ate" (Genesis 3:12). The woman pulls the same conniving dodge. "What's this that you have done?" "The serpent deceived me and I ate" (Genesis 3:13).

Cain was super lost. He killed his brother. God comes looking for Cain too, probing to see if any truth is in him. "Where is Abel your brother?" (Genesis 4:9). God asked the question to see if Cain trusted Him. The question gives Cain the opportunity to trust God and to confess his sin. Would he? Nope. Do you know how ridiculous it is to lie to God? Cain tried it. "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" Big mistake. "And the Lord said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground'" (Genesis 4:10). Confession is speaking the truth about your sin. God does not force you to confess. Remarkably, man has the ability to lie to God. It is rank foolishness and you do it; I do it. King David did it. It served him about as well as it serves you, which is to say, not well at all. But David brought his lying to an end.

David wrote this: "When I kept silent (literally when I plowed my sin under, hid it), my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord' and you

forgave the guilt of my sin” (Psalm 32:3-5). Confession is trusting God enough to speak the truth about the sin in your life. Some who are lost don’t want to be found. They lie to God and everyone else around them. God is searching for every human being on this planet. His Word goes out into this world like a woman, a poor woman, scratching around on her dirt floor looking for a lost coin. I am discovering that not everyone wants to be found. Here is a tragic verse from the Gospel of John, Jesus speaking: “And this is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19 - NIV).

Tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to Jesus in order to hear Him (Luke 15:1). Why? It was a matter of trust. Their guilt pressed them sore. They had lived contrary to God’s will. They had treated their neighbors shamefully. They had profaned themselves with their behavior. No one, in their true conscience, escapes their sin. What we need is forgiveness, relief, hope. Jesus was giving it. Grace, the Father’s love, a return to holiness, sanctity, purpose, freedom – Jesus’ Word was aflame in their hearts and these social outcasts were drawing near. No pretension, no spiritual dress-up, no white-washing their past – they came honestly, humbly, gratefully. And the religiously prim and proper were in a twist; they grumbled against Jesus. Listen to their pent-up vitriol: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). They refuse to even use His name. There seems to be zero joy in their lives; zero.

How many of y’all believe that if one doesn’t understand Christianity then one doesn’t understand life? How many of y’all believe that love originates with God and that His love is in us? How many of y’all believe that the Holy Bible is completely true; that Christ, true God and true man, died on a cross, paid the price for sin, rose again on Easter and is still among us to serve, to bless, to give us personally the forgiveness He won on the cross? Why is there a church? Why does God’s Word get preached over and over, Sunday after Sunday, why do we teach our children the faith, why has this dynamic reality called Christianity been flourishing for 2000 years? Why? Because God is searching for sinners – that is the reason behind every single one of those questions – because God is searching for sinners. Because God is relentless in His pursuit of those He loves. Because God is overjoyed whenever a single dirtbag repents of his sin, confesses his lostness, and turns his face toward the living Lord of Calvary. The church is in this earth because it is His instrument to gather His family and bless them with life, new life, eternal life, Christ’s life. He is never going to stop searching; until the Last Day, when the trumpet sounds the Messiah rides the clouds to conclude this creation, God is going to search and search and search.

That reality is going on all around you. Here, in this place, to be sure, but all over creation God is hunting down His lost sheep, searching for His lost coin, welcoming sinners into His embrace, His church and our joy matches His. Ours is a welcoming community. We meet our new best friends regularly when visitors come and sit at Christ’s feet with us. Do we care where they come from? No. You have a former juvenile delinquent for a pastor, how could you care where anyone else comes from? The church on earth loves it when a sinner is restored to Christ’s community. We repent of our sins. We confess the unhappy truth about our thoughts, our words, and our deeds. We trust God with the truth about ourselves. We have gotten ourselves lost and have done nothing to get ourselves found. Christ came for us.

Do you know what that entailed? The searching Shepherd had to be nailed to a tree. All of man's hate and greed and lust and deceit was located in His person – foul and death dealing – He bore it. For the joy of bringing you into His Kingdom, God the Son suffered for your sin. Blood streamed from the Shepherd's hands, His feet, His brow and His scourged back. The sinless Son of God paid the price for you to live eternally in His Father's house. Christ searched for you and here you are – listening to His Word just like those sinners of old who drew near to hear Him (isn't that amazing?). And there is joy in this place. The Living Lord is with us, to comfort and encourage and feed us with His death and resurrection, to feed us with His body and blood. We are forgiven. We are freed from the guilt and shame of our former sins. Life is laid before us and we walk in His ways. With all the believers in this holy house and with Christians throughout the world, we walk in His ways, following our Shepherd, trusting Him. All glory to His holy name.