

*"The Curious Case of the Sheep, the Coin,
and the Mid-Town Tunnel"*

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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September 12, 2004
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 51:1-10;
1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father, and Our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Honey, Honey – turn here, turn right. Let's go here, and if we follow this way then Lois can see Grand Central Station!" So we turned right. "Oh Honey," she said, "quick, quick, get over to the left!" But it was too late. We were also looking, you see, for the Manhattan Mid-town Tunnel. We had with us in the car Lois, who was Barbara's AFS sister in New Zealand. When Barbara was 16, she was there as a high school student, and she later came back for Lois's wedding. And that's where we met.

"Well Honey, we've missed the tunnel. But that's okay. Let's go up and see the station. We'll just go around the block." So around the block we went and the second time we came and we made the right and we hit Park Avenue. Up Park Avenue went and we came to the tunnel. As we descended into the tunnel we both saw the sign at the same time – 46th Street Tunnel. Which took us back up to the front of Grand Central Station and we went round to the right and down the avenue and back again . . . to find ourselves for the third time on Park Avenue. We were not lost! It was the Mid-town Tunnel that was lost.

Sheep don't have any problem about being lost, they just wander along being sheep. Who knows what the sheep was doing this morning – probably enjoying a nibble of something here and a nibble of something else there and just sort of wandering along. You know what sheep are like, right? "Baaa, I'm a sheep and I don't care." Coins, on the other hand, don't think about anything. They're either left where they were put or where they were dropped. They don't know whether they're lost or found.

The Pharisees knew where they were. They were pretty clear about where things stood. They knew who was found and who was lost. Now, before we go and make them the bad guys, let's try to understand them and where they were. They were people of great faith. They were people like you and me, and they were concerned when things seemed to be getting over the line. Which of course, is what Jesus was doing. After all, he was not only talking to people that he should not have been talking to, he was eating with them. (That doesn't mean anything to us, I know. But in Jesus' time, to sit down at a table with someone else was not only to say you agreed with them, but it was to endorse them; it was to embrace them as yours.) And that wasn't right, as far as the Pharisees could see. It was a hot button issue. What was he doing with these sinners and tax collectors? They were outcasts. And so they were grumbling. You notice, they weren't waving placards, they weren't yelling to Jesus, they were just grumbling about things, the way we grumble about things – about the church ordaining gay bishops; about the church examining things like blessing same sex unions; about the church asking questions about government practices and policies.

But they're hot button issues, and if we get into that this morning we won't be able to hear what it is that the Gospel is saying to us. But is it true that you and I have lists of who the outcasts are? I could make up a list, but that would be my list. But we all have them, don't we? It is so easy to make up such a list.

Last Saturday, Barbara and Lois and I were down in Baltimore. We wanted Lois to see the Inner Harbor, to ride on the harbor taxi and go to Fort McHenry. Later on we had lunch at the South Baltimore market and after we left the market we were on our way to see a show. As we were driving along the street, I saw a young guy, maybe late teens, early twenties, in his skater-type pants and shoes, top thrown over his shoulders, suntanned, and he was holding a mailbox and his eyes were closed; he was leaning back, and he looked awful. And I said, "Doesn't it just drive you up the wall, this drug stuff and drug culture? Look how it wrecks young people, and what it does around here." and we drove on.

During the show I was thinking about the text this morning, and I found myself realizing how I had failed as a disciple of Christ. You see, what I really ought to have done, was pull the car over when I saw that young man. I should have gotten out of the car. I should have walked over and talked to him, found out what was happening with him. And we had a cell phone in the car; I could have called and summoned the help that he needed. But I didn't. And I still bear the guilt of that. It's real easy to see the dirty, the outcasts, and miss the point.

It's a bit like Peter Ustinov, who had a dream. He dreamt that he had been elected Pope – can you imagine? Peter Ustinov as the Pope? It was a wonderful dream. There was a sort of white clouds of smoke coming out of the chimneys. There was a great celebration; the crowd was applauding; he was on the balcony and a member of the curious said to him, "Have you chosen a name?" Peter Ustinov thought for a minute and said, "Yes. Not Guilty the First." Someone else called out, "You mean 'Innocent', and by the way, that number has already been taken." "No" said Ustinov, "I don't mean Innocent; I mean I'm not guilty."

Do you notice what Jesus says about all this? When he hears the grumbling of the Pharisees, he doesn't berate them, he asks them a question. "Which of you," he says, "which of you having a hundred sheep and noticing one of the missing, wouldn't leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go looking for the one that's missing?" In the wilderness, I ask you! Not safely in the fold, the way the old hymn has it, these are dangerous things, no they're left out in the wilderness. Of course it's the same with coins, isn't it? Or when we lose something of value, isn't it?

How many times have you lost an important tax document? Or a piece of paper you're working on at home for the office? Or an engagement ring or wedding ring? Or money? Or something really valuable. You've all lost something really valuable, haven't you? Which one of you, when you've lost something like that, doesn't forget everything else and focus on what you've just lost? I know husbands here (including myself) who will tear the place apart to find a piece of paper. I know wives who will just about wreck the house (at least the plumbing) looking for a wedding or an engagement ring. Isn't that true? Isn't that what happens when we've lost something, don't we sort of put everything else out of mind and focus purely on what we've lost? That's what God's like, says Jesus.

And then, to rub salt into the wound, he does something outrageous. He turns around and he makes God a shepherd. Who in their right mind, in those days, would make God a shepherd? Those disgustingly filthy, unreliable, people that no one in their right mind would have anything to do with? Or a woman for pete's sake? Who in Jesus' day would make God a woman? We gag on people making God a woman today. The Pharisees are outraged. But Jesus wants us to understand what God is like. He doesn't do things the way we do things. God insists on being himself. And so the search is on for the ones who are lost. And you know, in a really strange and curious way, you and I know what that's like. In your own personal way, somehow God, through Christ or someone else, has touched you in your life and you're here this morning because of that. And then you hear in Jesus' parable, the call to help us join the search. It's only through us that others will be touched. It's only through us that God, through the power of Christ and the Spirit, can save. And you'll notice, we're not asked to anything other than find another person, to reach out to them, to touch them.

It's like standing in the grocery line at the supermarket. If you're anything like me, four people are ahead of you, and some nice person groping through their change purse and their coupon pocket, and it's taking twenty or thirty seconds, a minute, two minutes . . . Instead of watching the person do that, why don't we just turn our back on that and talk to the person in line behind us?

Do you know what I discovered waiting tables down in Texas? I discovered that people are more than willing to talk about their faith. They were more than willing to talk about prayer, how they think about God, and what was happening in their lives. They didn't want anything to do with the church, but they were more than willing to be touched . . . which is the beginning of being found. Which could possibly lead to them repenting. Now there's something to be happy about! What a wonderful thing to give God an excuse to throw a heavenly bash.

Think about that. You know what it's like when you find the paper or the wedding ring or the money that was mislaid. It's terrific! We have a feast here this morning. I know the helpings are tiny, but it's a celebration nonetheless. Not only a celebration that we've been found, but a celebration to tell us that we are called to go out and look for somebody out there . . . just simply to reach out and touch someone. A meal that empowers and a meal that celebrates.

Oh yes. The Mid-Town Tunnel. Well, we came along and made our right hand turn onto Park Avenue, and I spotted a New York cop standing on a traffic island. I pulled the car up, stopped, and said, "Excuse me. . . . Excuse me officer, would you mind telling me how to find the Mid-Town Tunnel?" "Sure. Keep on going till you can make a right. Go over to Second Avenue. Make a right on Second Avenue. Go to 36th Street. There's the Mid-Town Tunnel."

Those, and that, which had been lost, were found. And believe me, last Sunday, to get Lois to her plane at Kennedy, that was something to celebrate!

Amen.