

September 11, 2022
Pentecost 14, Proper 19 C
All Saints', Littleton, NH
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28
Psalm 14
Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15: 1-10

Well, we had a great loss this week. The death of Queen Elizabeth and all the coverage that followed reminded us of what a decent, humble, gracious, faithful and dutiful person she was.....and I'm sure that for many of us we were contrasting her with politicians and celebrities that surround us today. Through the chaos of her 70 years on the throne, she was a constant and steady hand that belied a centered life, and helped to calm the nation through troubled waters. 'Keep calm and carry on' , indeed! As Christians we are called to this kind of life and I want to address that this morning.

Today is the 21st anniversary of 9/11. It hardly seems possible that was 21 years ago. In one television program about the tragedy it showed the heroism of the people in the Pentagon who kept trying to go back in to find friends and colleagues – even when they weren't trained or dressed for it. The firefighters tried to dissuade them to no end.

It reminded me of the desperation of friends and family for days after the attack on the Twin Towers in N.Y.-- how people kept putting up pictures of lost loved ones hoping beyond hope that they were just lost in the crowd, or in a hospital somewhere. It soon became apparent that we lost over 3000 people that day in N.Y. –more than any attack on the country since Pearl Harbor. There were also those incredibly sad and tragic calls to loved ones from high in the towers when people above the fires began to realize they would not get out. I can't even begin to imagine what those calls must have been like. And those calls were not filled with hate and vengeance; they were just filled with love, longing, and sadness at the coming loss of communion with the other. One of my parishioners in my last parish worked for an airline union and had a good friend who was a

flight attendant on one of the planes that left from Boston. He helped his friend's mother clean out his apartment.

I found it rather nice that in this morning's Gospel were the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin and the anxiousness to recover them. Perhaps not quite the same circumstances or spiritual point as in the Twin Towers, but something of the same sentiment in the loss of something/someone held dear. The parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin is also followed in Luke by the parable of the 'lost' son – the 'prodigal' son. All of these parables tell of a joy that is experienced in finding the thing/animal/person that was lost. In the passage this morning from Paul's first letter to his young protégé, Timothy, he has a similar theme in that he identifies himself as such a miserable sinner – someone terribly lost, and he believes he was made an example so that others who are 'seeking to be found' would have confidence that God's grace was for them too.

The parables were of course a response to the Pharisees who were grumbling that Jesus ate with outcasts and sinners – the 'lost' to pious Jews. The point is somewhat lost on us, but table fellowship, those who you ate with, was of tremendous importance in Jewish society. The fear of being made unclean by eating with the wrong people was very real. Jesus' point was that rather than shun these people, we should go out and find them and feed them and help them to know that being found by God is so very possible and that God is actively looking for them and longing for them....that they too might sing those great words, " I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see."

And here's the deal about God finding people, finding us.....truly, to be found by God and enter into communion with God is a wonderful thing, but most of the time it takes us shepherds (you and me) to go get 'em. It's like we are part of a spiritual 'Amber Alert' – to find God's lost children. Certainly, God is calling them; but ears can be stopped up, and so often it takes the invitation of a friend and the reassurance that being found by God is just the most wonderful way to be alive! Sometimes we need to be reminded too. And just as God has a passion for us, we need to have a passion for others. We need to have the courage to go back into the building when they tell us we shouldn't or that, well, going into the building just isn't 'Episcopalian' – 'we don't want to be pushy about saving people's lives you know!'

And please tell me that you know I'm NOT talking about saving souls for Jesus in some simplistic, fundamentalistic way. It is so sad to me to see people preaching that all you have to do is say some formulaic prayer on your knees and you're in. Talk about modern Phariseeism---just do it like I do it, say it the way I say it, and follow my rules and you're 'saved'. To be sure, helping others find the joy of knowing God is the call of all of Jesus' followers, and this calling is one fueled by a deep desire to help others be truly found by God. It is not about just worshipping the way we worship.

Have you ever had that experience in your life when you have been 'found' spiritually and just the sense of joy and relief that comes over you; or have you seen that in others and how their life has been changed. What rejoicing! And goodness, you don't need to be a heroin addict to appreciate this. When you have experienced this peace of God that passes all understanding all the words of the hymns and the liturgy just come alive -- but it's not the words, it's what they point to!....this is sometimes hard for Episcopalians. Some of the Christian mystics talk of being ravished by God! What a concept! You know, all of our language in worship points to that found-ness and rejoicing. It is an experience of God that radically changes who we are and how we are in the world. As in the Eucharistic prayer this morning....'In him, you have delivered us from evil, and made us worthy to stand before you. In him, you have brought us out of error into truth, out of sin in to righteousness, out of death into life.'

I want to share a bit of a book I read while on vacation, *Testament of Devotion*, by Thomas Kelly. Kelly was a Quaker mystic and author of the last century, and a distant relative through my mother's family. He captures well this sense of longing to be found and centered in God. Forgive the rather long quote.....

We Western peoples are apt to think our great problems are external, environmental. We are not skilled in the inner life, where the real roots of our problem lie. For I would suggest that the true explanation of the complexity of our program is an inner one, not an outer one. The outer distractions of our interests reflect an inner lack of integration of our own lives. We are trying to be several selves at once, without all our selves being organized by a single, mastering Life within us. Each of us tends to be, not a single self, but a whole committee of selves. There is the civic self, the parental self, the financial self, the religious self, the society self, the

professional self, the literary self. And each of our selves is in turn a rank individualist, not co-operative but shouting out his vote loudly for himself when the voting time comes. And all too commonly we follow the common American method of getting a quick decision among conflicting claims within us. It is as if we have chairman of our committee of the many selves within us, who does not integrate the many into one but who merely counts the votes at each decision, and leaves disgruntled minorities. The claims of each self are still pressed....We are not integrated. We are distraught. We feel honestly the pull of many obligations and try to fulfill them all.

And we are unhappy, uneasy, strained, oppressed, and fearful we shall be shallow. For over the margins of life comes a whisper, a faint call, a premonition of richer living which we know we are passing by. Strained by the very mad pace of our daily outer burdens, we are further strained by an inward uneasiness, because we have hints that there is a way of life vastly richer and deeper than all this hurried existence, a life of unhurried serenity and peace and power. If only we could slip over into that Center! If only we could find the Silence which is the source of sound! We have seen and known some people who seem to have found this deep Center of living, where the fretful calls of life are integrated, where No as well as Yes can be said with confidence. We've seen such lives, integrated, unworried by the tangles of close decisions, unhurried, cheery, fresh, positive. These are not people of dallying idleness nor of obviously mooning meditation; they are busy carrying their full load as well as we, but without any chafing of the shoulders with the burden, with quiet joy and springing step. Surrounding the trifles of their daily life is an aura of infinite peace and power and joy. (p. 91-93)

O God, may we be so overcome with this joy found in you that we run back into those buildings on fire and help people out. May our anticipation of the joy when someone (we) finds themselves (our self) found in God carry us through our days, sustain our own journey, and bring us into glory with You.