

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 11, 2016
Pentecost 17
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 32:1-14
Psalm 51:1-11
I Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

One of my most vivid childhood memories occurred when I was six years old. The fact that I still remember it so clearly is testimony to how deeply it is burned into my consciousness! In the heat of summer, my grandparents loaded my two brothers and me into their car and took us from Nebraska to Tucson, Arizona, to see my father.

Imagine, if you will, three boys -- ages 6, 9, and 12 -- sitting together in the back seat of a car without air conditioning, traveling more than 1,500 miles with an ill-tempered grandfather whose fuse was shorter than a firecracker on the Fourth of July! We had heat, we had carsickness, and of course, the three of us fought and argued like brothers will do. At times it would get so bad that Grandpa Thelander would literally stop the car and say, "If you boys don't sit still and behave, I'm going to stop this car and make you get out and walk the rest of the way."

Now my older brothers Rod and Kent may not have been persuaded by that threat, but when you're six years old, and you look out the window and all you see

is cactus and sagebrush and desolation and vultures, you take it seriously! (If any of you ever go home from church wondering why your pastor is the way he is, *now* you know! The scars run long and deep!)

Once we arrived in Tucson, what should have been a paradise for a six year old boy turned into a nightmare for me. My father managed a large Guest Ranch outside of Tucson in the Arizona desert. It was a beautiful place. It had a swimming pool, and was basically a first class hotel in a big sandbox!

The problem was that there were assorted creatures that also enjoyed the facilities there. On one of my first trips to the swimming pool, I encountered a Gila Monster sunning itself near the water, so I quickly turned around and headed for the lodge.

And diamondback rattlesnakes would coil up in front of the guest units in order to heat themselves and keep warm. On many occasions, my father would have to go with his device that was forked on the end, catch the snakes behind their mouths, and take them away. And the final blow came to me when I was sitting at a table in the lobby of the resort, and a large black tarantula waltzed across the floor past where I was sitting.

To add insult to injury, once we had been there for a few days, my dad and his wife Nancy and my grandparents took us to "Old Tucson," where the old T.V. western High Chaparral was filmed. While we were there, among hundreds of

other tourists, I somehow got separated from the rest of my family. Before I knew it, I looked around, and no one looked familiar. I didn't see anyone that I knew. Just a mass of people, and the noise of a crowd.

I remember to this day what I felt in that moment. It was absolute terror. I was in the midst of hundreds of people, but I felt so alone. I don't know that I have ever been that afraid since. I was in a new world of snakes, spiders, lizards and God only knows what else. And I was utterly and completely *lost*.

So there, in the middle of the Arizona desert, I began to cry. At least that is my recollection of it. But many who were there will still testify that what they heard was a wailing of such immense proportions that it awakened the dead!

After what seemed like an eternity, I saw and recognized in the large crowd a face. It was the face of my father. He had realized that I was lost, and he had come looking for me. He held me close and wiped away my tears. And by the grace of God alone, I made it through that summer vacation!

Years later when I was pastoring a little congregation in Illinois, a popular Gospel song often filled the airways of the local Christian radio station. The song was entitled, "God loves people more than anything."

Our Gospel lesson today reveals the same theme. People matter to God. *You and I matter to God*. We are of inestimable worth to our Heavenly Father. The story of the Bible is the story of a Heavenly Father whose sole purpose in life

is seeking out people like you and me -- lost people -- and bringing them back into fellowship and relationship with Him.

Two parables in our Gospel text show us how fast and far God will go to seek us out and bring us to himself.

Many years ago, Ira Sankey wrote the famous hymn, “The Ninety and Nine,” based on this text. In Sankey’s hymn, the 99 sheep lie safely in the fold, and the Shepherd leaves them in safety to search for the one who is lost.

But that is not how Luke tells the story. In Luke's account, the 99 sheep are not in the fold, but more likely in the wilderness. Their safety is likely not guaranteed.

Think about it. *If* the 99 sheep are safe in the fold, then the act of searching for one lost sheep is but an act of frugality, an exercise in common sense. It is foolish *not* to act when there is possible gain with no possibility of loss.

But what if the 99 are not safely in the fold, but in the wilderness (closer to Luke’s description)? How do we assess the actions of the Shepherd who leaves 99 sheep in the wilderness in order to search for one who is lost?

Either the shepherd is foolish, or the shepherd loves the lost sheep and will risk everything -- including his own life -- until he finds it.

People...lost people...people like you and I... matter to God.

The second parable in our text tells of a woman who loses a coin. She lights a lamp and sweeps and searches the house until it is found.

In the case of both the lost sheep and the lost coin, we are told emphatically that the search continues *until the lost item is found*. There is no giving up the search in either story. The search continues unthwarted.

People -- lost people -- people like you and me -- matter to God.

As we prepare to come to the table this morning, I don't know where you are in your spiritual journey. I don't know where you may be in your life.

You may be here this morning, and you may not be a follower of Jesus. You have spent your life doing your own thing, going your own way, living from the resources of your own wisdom. It's common to all of us. The Bible tells us that "all of us, like sheep, have gone astray."

If I could say anything to you this morning, I would tell you that your life matters to God. *You* matter to God. You may not be following Jesus at this point in your life. But Jesus is most assuredly following *you*.

You may be here this morning as one who made a decision to follow Jesus some time ago, but you are at a point in your life where you feel somewhat lost. You sense a lack of focus, a lack of direction to your life and what's next in your life. You're struggling to discern God's will for you at this stage in your journey.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, I invite you to come with faith. And as you receive the bread and the wine, I want you to look closely with your eyes of faith. If you do, you will see the face of the Father, drawing near to you, seeking you out to welcome you into his loving arms.

The bread and wine this morning are tangible reminders to you of how very much *you* matter to God. They remind you that when it comes to God's love for you and God's desire to claim you as God's own, the search will *never* be called off. They remind you that this mystery we call life consists not so much in finding, but in *being found*.

So come with faith. Rest in his love. Receive his grace. And go forth in peace.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.