

Philemon 1-25
Psalm 139
Luke 14:25-33

Lost and Found

In a sentence:

We are not defined by sin but by the love of the God who seeks us in all circumstances

One of the side-effects of the waning of God in the public imagination in these latter days is that we have seen a corresponding reduction in the number of sinners: less God, less sin!

Of course, there is still plenty of wrong-doing going on, including all the big-ticket items: disrespect, murder, adultery, theft, lying and coveting abound. Yet little of this is now commonly recognised as sin, except by the few who still know why those particular transgressions might be the “big-ticket items”. We still lament all of this, of course, except perhaps for the coveting, which is the engine of our modern economies. But, for the most part, these are all once-were-sins. Whatever the root problem in the world today is, it is not “sin”. This is because we have lost the idea of God around which the popular notion of sin was constructed. Because the God who commands and against whom we can sin is no longer a shared experience, neither can we have in common that we are sinners in any sensible way. The accusation “sinner” was once powerful. “He welcomes tax collectors and sinners”, declare Jesus’ accusers in today’s Gospel reading; that *meant* something to Jesus and his accusers. These days the notion of sin is thought to be at least unhelpful inside the churches and is ridiculed outside of them.

Yet, if we are not sinners, do we not still experience ourselves as “lost”? We are disoriented by a senseless war in Ukraine, sabre-rattling in the South China Sea, climate change threatening to roast most things, and the unreconciled claims for justice out of colonial history, to say nothing of those threats and problems which have been with us much longer. Besides what we can see, COVID-19 has further undermined our sense of security by revealing how vulnerable we are to things we don’t even imagine might be over the horizon. And there is a prevailing sense that “everyone is so angry about everything all of the time”.¹ As much as we might like church to be a place of escape from all this, that doesn’t much work either. If it were just a bad dream, we might expect to wake up at some stage, but we’ve no reason to imagine anything other than that this is as good as it is going to get. *Where are we* as a society, as a church, as individual hearts and souls?

What I’ve described is not the lostness we see in Jesus’ parables about the sheep and the coin. What is lost now is not one sheep or coin but the whole flock and purse. The parable implies a holy huddle – 99 sheep, nine coins – waiting safe while the lost one is finally restored. The 99 and the nine left to huddle are, in the story, the righteous who know where they are. Read this way, the parables are stories of the ins and the outs – a moralistic account of how we relate to God. Here, Jesus allows that “sinner” implies the possibility of un-sinners, the “un-lost”. But, whatever Jesus allows in the rhetorical moment, the text is not finally about a moral purity from which a few have strayed.

¹ <https://www.smh.com.au/national/why-is-everyone-so-angry-about-everything-all-of-the-time-20220902-p5betf.html>

Jesus seems to be defending his interest in the “tax collectors and sinners” but his accusers are themselves also part of his interest. There is, then, an irony at play here, which is more obvious in the parable which follows today’s reading – the story of the unrighteous “prodigal son” whose self-righteous brother shows himself to be no less mistaken about the father’s love. Both these sons are lost, the one outside and the other inside, the clearly lost and the apparently un-lost.

This lostness in and out of the fold resonates with our experience today of a shared disorientation, and indicates that our attention should not be on the one lost sheep or coin but on the shepherd and the woman who seek the lost treasure. It is these who bind together the lost and those who think they are un-lost. To move from the parables to the broader gospel, the cross and the resurrection of Jesus are the key to interpreting our sense of being lost, or not. The cross captures those who are outcast – as the crucified Jesus is himself – and those who think they are “in-cast”, who think themselves among the safe 99. The cross is a leveller – capturing the ins and the outs, the pious and the impious, the religious and the secular. The cross becomes the one thing we have in common: that *all* are outside, whether we know it or not – that we are all lost. Faith in the cross is not merely faith that somehow God saves us in the death of Jesus if, by this, we mean God connects us back to the nine and the 99 who didn’t need saving. Faith in the cross sees the lost one and the unlost nine and 99 in a single vision.

There are, then, no 99 safe and the one lost – or, as it might seem in the churches today, one safe and 99 lost! “Sinner” doesn’t define us; it certainly doesn’t distinguish us from one another. The accusation “sinner” isn’t heard on Jesus’ lips but on the lips of those who accuse him and others. Jesus speaks instead of “hypocrites”, meaning those who refuse to see themselves as God sees them – as lost and found. Rather than accuse, Jesus stands for the one – the shepherd, the woman in her home – who sees and holds them all together.

And so there is no “safe”, un-lost community over against the lost, no sinners over against the righteous. We gather today, in this way, not as a holy huddle or a faithful remnant. We gather not to escape but to hear again that God finds us anywhere we might be, in or out.

If I ascend to heaven, you are there [*writes the psalmist*]; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

Psalm 139.8-12

A God such as this cannot know us as lost but only as found, cannot know us as sinners but as those destined for redemption.

We gather today as those lost in a lost world, to be reminded that we are sought, and to become seekers ourselves.

We gather as those dying, to be reminded of the promise of life, and to become signs of that promise.

We gather to keep hope alive – for our own sake, and so that we might become signs of hope for the world.

So, if God has found you, become yourself a seeker, a sign of promise, and a beacon of hope within a world which knows itself only as lost.
