All Saints’ Church Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 11, 2016, Homecoming Year C

Exodus 32:7-14 Timothy 1:1-12

Psalm 51 Luke 15:1-10

We pray in the name of the Living Lord. Amen

It’s 9/11. The 15th anniversary of the heinous acts committed on our soil, against our people. The 10th anniversary also fell on a Sunday. A Sunday that often, like today, is a day that marks homecoming for churches all over the US. Like us, Sunday schools, choirs, community suppers, E*f*M groups, prayer circles are beginning again with the start of school.

It’s not an easy pairing…. even jarring: Homecoming Sunday on 9/11.

Scripture helps us put the day in perspective: “the saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

It’s easy to see and name, the Evil perpetrated against each other, our own selves, and our world, lifting up our need for a savior. 9/11 is a reminder that even the religious can commit horrific acts in the name of God. The masterminds and perpetrators of the attacks on 9/11 justified their acts as “an act of faith.” Within our own Christian faith, burning “heretics” in the Inquisition was called, “auto de fe”: an act of faith. Oh my.

I am reminded of John Newton, a slave trader, who fell to his knees over his evil actions and wrote “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.”

I must admit, I had a difficult time with the word, “wretch” the first time I learned the hymn… it seemed harsh, but then I learned the history of how the hymn came about, and it all made sense. He was a wretch….. and though most of us don’t commit such heinous acts as his, “wretch” is not just about naming an individual….we are naming the evil that is perpetrated everywhere. It can be so wretched.

Martin Luther, the great reformer, struggled with his own sense of being “wretched.” And he was moved to a new sense of freedom inspired by the words of Timothy.

Finally he could let go of berating himself as a sinner, as not righteous enough, and realized that the answer to a sinful world was not his own perfection, but the perfection of God’s righteousness. A gift he needed to just receive.

Apostle Paul had the same reaction. As a murderer of the people of “the Way,” he was wretched. He was turned upside down on his horse, on the way to kill, and he was saved by God’s grace and forgiveness. A gift he needed to just receive.

Notice that these examples are all men…. men who have power, privilege and education. (Even the men who designed the 9/11 attacks were men of power and privilege). Paul, Martin Luther and John Newton were worried about their own proclivity to violence, arrogance, power, and control: their version of sin.

And yet there is another form of this “sin.” Rather than an outwardly expression of violence, it comes as an inwardly attack on one’s self. It can be just as violent. I think about abused women who respond to violence perpetrated against them by attacking themselves; and it’s a vicious attack. And I think of too many girls in the hell of anorexia… as they attack their very own lives, killing it sometimes not so slowly. Addicts….children of addicts, the homeless, the hungry, the disenfranchised….. often attack themselves and they become invisible to not only society but to themselves…. attacks just as cruel and heartless. The gesture they need is not so much to “receive” God’s grace, but to break out, and act, to take God’s grace, to not be caught up in their own passivity and death dealing inner blows.

Jesus brings both these expressions of violence to the table. Sinning is not only attacking and acting arrogant with overweening power, but also shrinking into oneself so far, one becomes invisible and closed off.

The religious leaders are grumbling: “this fellow welcomes sinners.” Actually the Greek is more specific: “this fellow ***seeks*** out sinners……he even eats with them. Oh my.

Jesus’ response to their grumbling is to tell a parable.

“Which one of you having a 100 sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”

The answer to that is, “No one!”

My great uncle, a sheep rancher explained it very carefully to me. The one, that sheep, the one that wondered off…. is sick. Sheep never wander off by themselves; they want to be together. They are easy to herd. The one that leaves is nature’s way of dealing with illness. He will become the “sacrificial lamb” for the others as well, as the wolves will be satisfied with the loner, separated….. he is “meant” for the wolves, no matter what.

But wait, Jesus is challenging this idea. He is turning on its head the wolf’s banquet of the lone sheep. God seeks us out, no matter what… the sick, the lonely, the disoriented, the violent, the passive, the fearful, the arrogant…. And God invites us to dine with divinity.

And a woman having silver coins? Never. Women didn’t control money. This image would make no sense to the hearers. And what makes it even more difficult, this image is directly tied to an image of God as a woman. Unheard of. Not only are we introduced to the feminine traits of the divine: forgiveness, mercy, comfort, and salvific, we see God as the least, the subordinate, the slightest, and yet still running the show, seeking us out.

Jesus is giving us such a radical image of God.

Often when we lose faith in God, we talk about “not believing in Jesus the way I am supposed to,” or “not getting the Trinity,” or “being angry with God,” or “not understanding suffering, God’s will, fate, or evil.”

Fair enough, but I think something else is happening. Behind all of these fears, there is something more fundamental. We have lost the trust and faith that God is seeking us out, no matter what. Always and relentlessly… whether we are violent against others or ourselves, acting or not acting, believing or not believing, fearing, or hiding, God is seeking us out, always.

I was in my late 20’s in grad school and took a rare afternoon off to visit the Bronx Zoo. A woman, not much older than I was at the time, began screaming at the top of her lungs:

“I have lost my baby. She was right here. Help me find her.”

Many of us ran to her side. The empty stroller was evident. “She’s two, a mop of curly hair; she’s wearing red.”

We all spread out….. Maybe 5 minutes went by…. The longest five minutes ever for that mother. But then I heard a voice. “She’s here. I found her. Come.”

We all ran in the direction of the voice and I could see the mother coming in from my right side, running to her daughter, picking her up and twirling her in the air.

There were tears and laughter…. All of us broke down.

The focus was not on the child or any kind of repentance. Rather it was all about celebrating. We became the angels of God, celebrating with tears and laughter, over the finding of this one.

God seeks you out in the same way. And in a funny way, it doesn’t matter who you are. It’s really not about you or your worthiness or your innocence or your violence or your fears…. God is on the hunt, relentlessly…. Repenting will come in its due time. Right now it’s all about the finding, the twirling, the dining, the banquet, the joy. God is insistent on a celebration. And it’s this Seeking Love that will always defeat the death blows of violence and sin.

And this seeking out will always be a homecoming!

Amen.