

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
September 16, 2007

## **Mercy Unrelenting**

Luke 15:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Today, Jesus tells a story about being lost and then found again.

Can you remember a time when you were lost?

You may remember the story I've told on myself  
about the time I was lost in downtown Pittsburgh,  
winding my way around skyscraper after skyscraper,  
unable to find the garage where I had parked my car.  
It was disconcerting, to say the least.

But there are many ways of being lost,  
some of them more distressing by far  
than being mixed up and turned around downtown.

I know a few of you are avid fans of the TV series *LOST*,  
and, like me, you're disappointed that the new season  
doesn't start until February!

The characters on the show are lost on an island,  
presumably somewhere in the Pacific,  
where their plane has crashed under freakish circumstances.

During the 3 seasons of the show so far  
we have come to know the characters in depth,  
and to discover what makes them tick.

Through flashbacks into their previous lives  
we begin to realize why they act the way they do;  
we learn the stories of their past that haunt them;  
we come to understand the fears that pursue them,  
and seem to confront them in uncanny ways  
on this island.

We learn that each of the characters  
has *lost* something or someone dear to them:  
a father or mother, a spouse, a friend,  
self-respect, sobriety, even a kidney.

The loss each man or woman has suffered,  
has resulted in their *being* lost, spiritually,  
emotionally turned around, mixed up, directionless.

The appeal of the show, in part,  
is that – strange as their circumstances may be –  
we can relate to these men and women.

We have all suffered the loss of something dear:  
the loss of a loved one, the loss of a dream,  
the loss a friendship, or a job,  
the loss of innocence, the loss of youth,  
the loss of faith.

And we have all had the experience of *being lost*,  
of wandering without a clear sense of where we're going,  
wondering, hoping, praying for the way ahead to become clear.  
Should I stay in this job?  
Should I stay in this marriage?  
Which career should I pursue?  
How will I live without him?  
How can I go on now that she is gone?  
Will this addiction ruin my career, my family,  
and finally finish me off?  
Is God really listening to my prayers?  
Is God even there?

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Today, Jesus tells us a story of lost things:  
a lost sheep and a lost coin.  
(Though we haven't read it today,  
these parables are followed  
with the story of a lost son.)

In and of themselves, these are comforting parables  
because we can identify with the one who has lost something,  
and finally finds what it, and rejoices.

Or we identify with the one who is lost,  
but is sought and found by someone who cares  
and is brought safely home.

Jesus reassures us that  
no matter how lost we become,  
no matter how alone, how disoriented, how confused,  
how unsure of the best way forward in life,  
God will pursue us, and find us, and bring us safely home;  
and God and all God's heaven will rejoice at our homecoming.

However, when you consider the context  
in which these parables are told,

the story around the stories,  
we find that these parables have a cutting edge,  
and they cut both ways.  
They comfort us, but they also require something of us.

The stories are told to, and for the sake of, the Scribes and Pharisees  
who are grumbling because Jesus is eating with  
sinners, tax collectors and the like.

These righteous religious leaders cannot understand  
why Jesus would want to socialize with these  
scoundrels and outcasts.

The righteous ones believe the sinners are so lost  
as to be beyond redemption.

Shouldn't Jesus rather be honoring those who work so hard  
to be morally upright and religiously faithful.

Does Jesus really mean that God prefers  
the prostitute, the drunk, the heroin junkie, or the porn addict,  
the adulterer, the internet phisher and identity thief,  
rather than the law-abiding Presbyterian.

While we work hard to be respectable and to live our lives according  
to a certain moral code, a certain standard of behavior,  
they are given over to their base drives and desires,  
and have no self-control.

They may have even injured us or someone we love  
in pursuit of their vices,  
in their mixed up morality.

If we had our way,  
they'd all be locked up in a prison,  
so the rest of us respectable folk don't have to be bothered.

Of course, those are the more extreme cases.

Then there are those we know  
who fall to lesser addictions or obsessions,  
or laziness, or self-absorption, or constant complaining,  
or some form of emotional neediness.

First we feel sorry for them, then we grow impatient with them,  
we analyze them, begin to avoid them,  
maybe even gossip about them,  
and wish they would either get over their issues  
or leave us out of them.

But Jesus tells a story about a man who cares about every last one  
of his 100 sheep.

The loss of one sheep could be overlooked,  
written off as too much hassle.  
But this man will not give up on the one that is lost,  
but goes off and searches relentlessly until he finds it  
and brings it home.

And there's the woman who loses just one of 10 silver coins.  
But she cannot ignore the value of the one coin.  
She cannot let it go and just get on with her day.  
It is too valuable.  
So she searches high and low until she finds it.

And when this man and this woman are reunited  
with the one they have lost,  
they call together their friends and neighbors  
and they have a celebration,  
and they rejoice over the one that was found.

God is like this, Jesus says.

This is the loving and merciful heart of God  
toward the ones that you would so easily  
cast out of your sight, out of your hearing,  
out of your acquaintance.

When a lost one is found, when a sinner changes his ways,  
when the emotionally disturbed find peace,  
when the mental nut finds balance,  
there is more joy heaven over this one,  
than over the 99 who have kept it all together,  
and maintained their respectability.

And here is the sharp, cutting edge of the parables:  
If you want to share in God's celebration, says Jesus,  
you must also share in God's merciful disposition  
toward these sinners and outcasts.

If you simply write them off,  
if you give up on one that God hasn't given up on,  
then your spirit is far from God,  
and you are missing out on the celebration  
God is having.

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So, how about you?  
Is your love of others based on merit or mercy?

How do you treat those who do not meet your standards?

To have a heart like God's is the calling of our spiritual life in Christ.

To love as God loves is this:

to want for others the mercy we desire for ourselves.

This is the mercy we proclaim today in the sacrament of Baptism.

When we baptize a child, as we have done with Zane today,  
we proclaim that this little one  
belongs to God.

We proclaim that God's mercy and goodness will follow this child  
all the days of his life,  
and that he will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

We proclaim that God's mercy and goodness are unrelenting  
and will never come to an end,  
no matter what happens to Zane,  
no matter what Zane does.

There is nothing – absolutely nothing – that Zane Pacek can ever do  
that will cause God to write him off as worthless.

Of course, we hope and pray that Zane will be spared  
the harsher realities of human existence.

And judging from the lives of his very likable parents,  
Zane is likely to have good friends  
and to live a respectable life, himself.

But should Zane veer off the path and deep into the wilderness,  
and be set upon by all sorts of beastly troubles,  
and be exposed to the raw elements of life,  
God will not rest until Zane is found,  
and brought safely home, and restored to his rightful place  
in the family of God.

If there is someone in your life with whom you are angry,  
someone who has wronged you,  
someone who drives you out-of-your-mind crazy,  
someone whose behavior is dreadful,  
try this:

Imagine that person,  
on the day of his baptism.

Imagine that person on the day her parents  
held her before the church

and expressed their hope that this child  
would be raised to know Christ  
and to love God,  
and to have the faith that leads to eternal life.

Or if they are not Christian,  
imagine them at the same age, held by adoring parents,  
hoping and praying for their child to have a good life,  
with good friends, and fulfilling work, and a loving family.

That's not to say this person shouldn't face any consequences,  
or that a criminal shouldn't be brought to justice,  
or that a wrongdoer shouldn't be held accountable  
for his actions, or hers.

But if you can see the person as a beloved child of God  
then *YOU* will have been found  
by the power and grace of this parable.

For one of the greatest punishments of all  
is to be stuck with a heart that cannot love  
that cannot show mercy to an offender.

But If you can find it in yourself  
to show the same mercy that you have received,  
to refuse to give up on one God hasn't given up on,  
then you will near - near, indeed -  
to the kingdom of God.