

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 11th, 2022

Exodus 32:7-14

Psalm 51:1-11

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

Psalm 51:11 “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”

Lost and Found

A few months after September 11th, 2001, I was in New York in Grand Central Station.

The station is enormous and provides access to upstate New York and, through the subway system that is also there, all the boroughs. The main level of Grand Central Station has an iconic clock you may have seen in the movies. A symbol for the time that relentlessly marches on despite the events of the moment. Crowds of people walk and sometimes scurry to the ticket section and train platforms. It is a building that embodies a tremendous sense of purpose.

While there, I came upon row after row of photos of people gone missing since September 11th. Postings included appeals for information, contact telephone numbers, and precious hope that the missing person might still be alive. I remember trying to say a prayer for some of the faces that I saw so that they would be found safe and sound. There were too many, and I was moved to say one prayer for them. I wondered about the families and friends who were worried, fearful, and dismayed that they might never know what happened to their loved ones. My heart ached for them. Losing someone, especially if you do not know what

happened to them, is one of life's most painful experiences. And when we cannot go to find them, we are left with the hope that they will be restored to us.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus asks the people, "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" It is a powerful question. Should I leave my sheep in the wilderness, knowing they could be defenseless against a predator, to find one? Yes, the ninety-nine will take care of each other. There is safety in numbers. The lost one has no one unless someone decides that their life is precious and goes to look for them.

It is not hard to imagine the distress felt by a shepherd who realizes that one in their care is missing. I also wonder what it might be like for the lost sheep. Maybe it is getting dark, and the sheep realizes it does not have the protection of the herd. "Is the shepherd coming; it wonders. Will I make it through the night? I am thirsty, tired, and hungry. Will I die here all alone?" Imagine the unbounded joy the sheep might feel upon hearing the shepherd calling for it. Imagine what it must feel like to discover that someone has been looking for you. Imagine the emotional swell in your heart when you know you have been found. If sheep could sing, would the words from "I come with joy to meet my lord" pour from its lips?

Whether we are rejoicing because we have found what was lost or rejoicing that we have been found, there is much to celebrate. We celebrate because we recognize that all that God created is of value and that all of God's creation matters.

I want to also talk about grief and mourning. Because sometimes what or who is lost will not return. It is the nature of life that nothing and no one is forever. People are born, live, and die. It will happen to all of us and those we love. Sometimes we lose family or friends with whom we were once very close. They are still alive; however, they no longer want to be a part of our lives. Sometimes we lose our homes because of financial or disastrous circumstances. And sometimes we lose our health suddenly or due to a chronic condition. Moving through these events may depend on our willingness to allow our spirit to take the lead. I know my ego will not save me when I am beset with grief, anxiety, fear, or even sometimes a sense of hopelessness. I can never “think my way” out of the situation. I know I must let the spirit within me seek the counsel of my creator, my redeemer, and the light of my life. Only then do I find comfort and peace. I believe that the ability to experience the presence of God sustains us in a time of loss.

I was blessed to be part of a webinar with Sister Joan Chittister yesterday. She provided us with spiritual nuggets from her book, *The Monastic Heart: 50 Simple Practices for a Contemplative and Fulfilling Life*. This book was the subject of our book study in August. Sr. Joan walked us through several practices that can help us to develop a “monastic mindset.” The inside jacket of her book says, “This same monastic mindset can help us grow in wisdom, equanimity, and strength of soul as we seek restoration and renewal both at home and in the world.” In her presentation, she gave us ideas about taking the benefits of monastic life and incorporating them into our lives today. She offered ways to help us see that all our challenges

can leave us feeling lost and unable to know how to respond. Sister Joan reminded us that the benefit of having spiritual practices and cultivating the “spiritual seeker” within helps us to keep first things first, our relationship with God. This relationship grounds us in our purpose, to serve God. We may not understand all that happens or why, but we continue on our way nonetheless, serving God as best we can.

There are times when I know I have wandered away from God. I allow myself to get distracted by busyness or start the day without prayer. On those days when I check my email before I check in with God, I know that I am off to a shaky start. And while I might not yet be lost, I am grateful when God reminds me that caring for my spirit, feeding it, nurturing it, and protecting it is more important than anything else. Wouldn't it be wonderful if every time you picked up your smartphone, your home screen had a wallpaper that said, “Have you prayed yet?”

Daily prayer, reading scripture and pondering the meaning of what we read, creating sacred space in our homes, taking time to center ourselves before worship, stopping to pay attention to the beauty of life can, and engaging in “holy leisure,” according to Sr. Joan, help us experience the presence of God. This centering allows us to weather the tough times.

In closing, I want to end with a poem by Max Ehrmann that also provides us with a recipe for contemplative and centered living during challenging moments. It is called *Desiderata* (which means things desired as essentials), and I hope that you will find it helpful,

Go placidly amid the noise and the haste and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible, without surrender, be on good terms with all persons.

Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even to the dull and the ignorant; they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons; they are vexatious to the spirit. If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.

Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.

Exercise caution in your business affairs, for the world is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals, and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself. Especially do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment, it is as perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth.

Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.

Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here.

And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be. And whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul. With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.

by Max Ehrmann ©1927

Source: <https://www.desiderata.com/desiderata.html>, retrieved September 10th, 2022.

