

**A Sermon for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost  
at St. John's Church, Norwood Parish  
16 September 2007**

Proper 19: Exodus 32:1,7-14; Psalm 51, I Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10

Our readings this morning seem to be all about sin: Sin in the wilderness, God's call to Paul in spite of his being "foremost" among sinners, and Jesus eating among and welcoming tax collectors and other sinners -- which in the eyes of the Pharisees constituted Jesus' own grave sin, and today's Psalm may be familiar to you from Ash Wednesday, the day when we come face-to-face with our own sin. Now, don't go getting all glum and switch me off, at least not yet; after all, who wants to hear, or talk, about sin on a beautiful late summer morning [afternoon]. Our readings aren't about judgment, fire and brimstone. There's good news here: the people weren't destroyed because of the golden calf because of God's mercy; Paul boasts of God's grace and "utmost patience" in calling him to God's service; and Jesus says that there is joy in heaven over those who were lost and are found by, and respond to, God.

Even in the Psalm there is hope; indeed, the Church has pulled out four verses from the Psalm and appointed them for morning devotion. You will find them in this devotional form on page 137 of the Prayer Book. Go ahead and open a prayer book to page 137. There you'll find, "In the Morning," one of the "Daily Devotions for Individuals and Families." I think this is a particularly fine way to begin the day, and I commend it to you. I say that because this is the way I begin my day. Some days this one page devotion takes all the time I have before I need to be up and going; most days after the reading these verses and from First Peter, I move into the appointed readings for Morning Prayer and pray the rest of the morning office. Let's read these verses from Psalm 51 together.

*Open my lips, O Lord, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.*

*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.*

*Cast me not away from your presence and take not your holy Spirit from me.*

*Give me the joy of your saving help again and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.*

*Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,*

*as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.*

As you might imagine, the line asking God to "Create in me a clean heart" has taken on special meaning for this cardiac patient. Perhaps there is something here for you, too.

We have all had the experience of being lost. As adults and as children, we have all gotten lost. Can you remember the last time you were lost; perhaps you are feeling lost right now, and that's why you are here. (And I'm glad you are here, hope you will keep coming, and let us know how we can support you.)

There's the geographic sort of 'lost.' Perhaps you ran after your dog into an unfamiliar part of your childhood neighborhood, and you might as well have been in utter wilderness. You are in a new school with lots of taller kids rushing around you; they seem to know where they're going, but you haven't a clue and all those tall people don't seem to even see you, let alone recognize how lost you are. You were out hiking or skiing and the trail sort of disappeared in front of you, and when you turned around, you couldn't really make out the trail behind you. You were shopping and wandered off looking for something you thought you wanted, and then couldn't find your companion, parents, or your child. Or your familiar route was changed, the detour not well marked, there were no familiar landmarks, and you haven't a clue where you are. Or may be you are just a "guy" unequipped with a gene to ask for directions. There's that sort of geographic sort of being lost.

And then there's the emotional sort of lost. Your children are now off-to-school, to college, to their careers, and what are you supposed to do with yourself? Or maybe those children just turned two, or 14 and what are you supposed to do with them now? You have lost your job, or you have retired, or you have graduated, and you feel that you have lost your familiar identity. Or maybe it is time to change where you live -- your family needs more room, or you need everything on one floor; you need to be closer to work or you need to be closer to assistance. Or maybe you have received a fearful diagnosis, or maybe a treasured relationship has become strained or shattered, or your beloved has died. Perhaps you have realized that you are stuck in an unproductive habit; maybe this is a pattern of behavior which is not helpful to you and possibly hurtful to others. There are all sorts of ways to be lost.

We have all had the experience of being lost. So, we readily identify with the lost sheep, and how glad we are that we have a shepherd who will leave the rest of the flock to search for us. Once we are found, our good shepherd will throw us over his shoulders, and we will feel safe and at home. This image of the good shepherd with the formerly lost sheep over his shoulders is so powerful, it was actually the Early Church's first image of Jesus. Before there were depictions of Jesus on the cross, there were wall paintings of the good shepherd with the found sheep over his shoulders in the catacombs and early house churches, pictures. And that is all powerfully true, comforting and wonderful.

But, it is not the point Jesus was trying to make in first telling the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son (the parable of the prodigal which we read back in Lent immediately follows the lost coin). We are so grateful for being found ourselves that we leap over Jesus' opening words: "Who among you ?" Indeed, who among you when you have lost your beloved lamb or a treasured coin - representing a whole day's labor - will not go and search for it and rejoice when you have found it. Jesus was not encouraging his hearers to identify with the lost lamb or the lost coin (Frankly, I doubt that a coin much cares about whether it is being lost or found!); instead, Jesus wanted his first hearers to identify with the shepherd.

Today we are also focusing on the ministries of shepherds among us. We will be commissioning our Church School teachers as their new year with their new classes begins. These shepherds may be ministering to some temporarily lost sheep as they search for their new classroom. I can still remember how lost and fearful I felt when I was too old for Miss Helen's kindergarten class, but had graduated to, and was told I really attend, Mrs. Palmer's primary class: I was bereft, the familiar pattern of my life was being taken from me. Our teaching shepherds may find that some of their sheep will go astray now and then -- not geographically, but behaviorally, and we will pray for the grace of repentance for us all to get back on track. But mostly, this will be a new year of adventure in learning together, and we are so very grateful for all who teach and all who learn. This is an occasion for rejoicing!

In today's Parish Hall Forum, our Stephen Ministers will be focusing with us on the ministry of Pastoral Care: The ministry of extending God's care and concern to one another through, what the Prayer Book calls, "the changes and chances of this mortal life." Pastoral Care is a many faceted ministry, and far from being the sole province of designated pastors, pastoral care is a ministry in which we all participate whenever we gather together. Whether it is for worship or class, a meeting or a rehearsal, whenever we are with one another part of our agenda is to look out for one another. Pastoral care begins when we first greet one another and extends to our prayers for one another; pastoral care develops into the particular forms which we will be investigating in the Forum.

You may be saying that, oh well, how nice that other people are called to the ministry of teaching or pastoral care, but they are not for me. I wonder what Timothy, Paul's protégé and former secretary, had said or written to Paul to provoke Paul to respond with this portion of his epistle to Timothy. Reading between the lines, one wonders if Timothy had claimed that he was unworthy or unequipped to tell the story of the Good News of God revealed in Jesus, or to extend God's care and concern to those to whom he was being called. Paul wasn't going to let him off so easily: Among the unworthy and the ill-equipped

Paul was foremost! Nobody was more unworthy or unequipped for his service than Paul. But by the grace, mercy and compassion of God, Paul had been strengthened and appointed to God's service. What Paul did was show up, and let God work through him. That is really all that can be asked of any of us: that we show up and let God work through us. That is what our teachers will be doing, and what we do as we seek to care for one another. Then perhaps some of the other verses from the Psalm 51 morning devotion will take on new and special meaning.

*Open my lips, O Lord, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise. ...*

*Cast me not away from your presence and take not your holy Spirit from me.*

*Give me the joy of your saving help again and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.*

And then there will be rejoicing here and in heaven:

*Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:*

*as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.*

Harrison West+