

Please pray with me. May the meditations of my heart and the words of my lips be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, and may you add a blessing to the hearing and understanding of this message today. Amen.

There is a certain staff member that one day lost her keys.
After meetings we looked everywhere and they weren't anywhere.
Luckily, there was an extra set of most of the keys she needed,
and though searching intently, they went home without the keys.
Days, weeks, months passed.
It wasn't until we moved the old piano out of the youth room
that somehow they shook loose and were found as they dropped to the ground.
No idea how they got inside the piano.
When I texted a picture of the keys,
there was great joy, laughter and rejoicing over the found keys.
Most of us know what it is to rejoice when we find something that we've lost.

The question Jesus asks in this week's Gospel –
"Which of you having 100 sheep, and, losing one,
does not leave the 99 in the wilderness to go and search for the one?"
is the easiest question Jesus ever asks.
The answer is an emphatic "No one would do this."

And, yet, the series of violent acts in our country,
and our unwillingness to do what is needful to quell them
proves over and over that we are sacrificing the one –
the child, politician, pundit, immigrant, veteran, trans kid –
rather than do the hard thing and make sure all are saved,
and all are accounted for.

This makes us the lost.
ALL of us.

In the context of the lost sheep and the lost coin,
and after the week we've had,
with yet another instance of political [gun] violence

as a sign that we have lost our way,
can we agree that we have lost our way?
That we are not living as the best version of ourselves right now,
even if we disagree on what the right way is,
do we agree that this is not it?
In what ways are we ourselves lost –
in the midst of yet another shooting,
yet another act of political violence,
yet another terrifying day in the news in which
this horrific act was immediately followed by
another shooting in a school?

Where is God in this?
God is seeking the lost.
And my friends, WE are lost.
All of us.

Thanks be to God, Jesus is not like us.
He never stops searching for the lost one –
even the unpopular lost one,
even and especially the one we consider the undeserving lost one,
even and especially the one we consider the sinful lost one,
Jesus doesn't stop searching for the lost one until that one is found.
This is the Good News of the gospel reading.

The real secret to these lost and found texts is that,
at the end of the day, there are not the many and the one,
but always only the one.
We are the one.
Our neighbor is the one.
All of us are lost.
Jesus will not rest until all of us are found.
And he calls us to join in this mission of wholeness.
And, so, from here, what does "found" look like?
How do we move from grief to rejoicing,

from mourning to dancing?
Could empathy and compassion be a part of the path to found-ness?
When our pain matters to someone else...
doesn't that feel like being found?
When someone sees you, pain and all?
When we are seen without our masks on?

"What brings you from grumbling to joy?" A pastor asked,
The response:

"When someone just sits with me, and listens, and sees me,
and doesn't try to fix anything but just has compassion for me....
and I feel seen and heard...
that brings me out of grumbling and if not all the way to joy,
it at least sets me on the path there."

Being the recipient of empathy makes us feel found,
but the act of empathizing also does this, I think,
because it is by empathizing for another that we
remember both their humanity,
their child-of-God-ness, and our own.
Empathy is feeling our hearts break for
our next-door neighbor who lost her husband,
and for the children starving in Gaza,
and for the immigrants being taken from their workplaces by ICE,
and for bullied trans kids,
and for people with the exact opposite political views of our own.

I believe that the Holy Spirit is what brings to us the
inclination that urges us to have empathy,
not only when it is "our people" who are wounded,
but when it is our enemy.

Having empathy does not mean we have to
like the person for whom we have empathy,
nor agree with them.

God's celebration of the lost's return is pure grace,

undeserved joy and love.
They are found.
It is through the power of God that
we have the capacity to be found, too.

Even, and especially because we are made in God's image,
we have the capacity to be found and to feel empathy.
These words of God from the prophet Jeremiah are powerful,
and ours today:

I am torn apart that my people are torn apart.
I despair at the atrocities that grip them.
Is there no healing salve in Gilead?
Does no healer live there?
Why do my people not recover?
I wish my head were a spring of water,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
so I could weep day and night
for the slain of my people.
--- Jeremiah 8:21-9:1

And then God came to us in Jesus and showed us the way.
A way of service and love.

Paul sets this way before us in Romans 12

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good;

¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection;
outdo one another in showing honor.

¹¹ Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord.

¹² Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer.

¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.

¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another;
do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly;
do not claim to be wiser than you are.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil,

but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord."

²⁰ Instead, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

May the healing salve be found.

May the healers heal.

May we be found.

May ALL of us be found.

May our nation, our world be found in the coming days, weeks and months, and may God rejoice.

Amen.