

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (c)
Exodus 32:7-14 1 Timothy 1:12-17 Luke 15:1-10
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
September 11, 2022 (Traditional)

I remember the sheer terror of getting separated from my mom in McCabe's department store, as a young child. I was running desperately around the store for ten minutes, crying, and I when I finally spotted my mom off in the distance, looking for me, I saw how frantic she was, trying to find me. She ran over and scooped me up and hugged me tight. She had found her precious baby. And it felt so good, being in her arms. By the fourth time it happened that summer, though, in the same department store, she looked kind of disappointed that I'd come back.

In the Exodus reading, the Israelites are like little children wandering off in the store. Moses, remember, was up on the mountain, receiving the law. That law is like the map they need for the journey ahead of them. God loved them, and wanted to give them the map. But as we see, they get bored and distracted. Instead of relying on God, waiting for his Word, they take matters into their own hands. That golden calf in the lesson...it's a quick fix. All the idols that we worship—all the false gods—are basically quick fixes. These are the gods who make us feel good *right now*, in the moment.

Now a lot of the modern world might think of idolatry as some kind of old fashioned sin that only happens in the bible. But you and I, modern Christians, should know that idolatry is the heart of every sin we commit every day. It is putting our hope, our trust, in something other than the God who gives us life. It's like we grab hold of toys that can entertain us for the time being. Come to think of it, when I got lost all those times that summer in McCabes—I remember very well what I was doing. Every time I got lost, it was literally because I had found something in the toy department. Some gadget got my attention, so I lost track of my mom—the person I was supposed to stick by. Idolatry is like investing all our hope and life in the toys, but the toys cannot give us what we need.

God has an absolute claim on us, obviously; but even deeper: he loves us and wants a relationship with us. But sin makes us run away from him and grab hold of that other stuff. In sin we forget who God is; deep down our fears, our basic insecurity as created beings separated from God—that fear starts taking over. And even when God is trying to reach us, all we see is the stuff that scares us. Sin makes it really hard for us to put our trust in anything we cannot control. We'll only put our faith in things that we feel we have a handle on. As adults we still might have our toys, but we also start grasping onto stuff like politics, personalities, different philosophies. The idols might not be toys anymore, but the result is the same. We forget our parent—the only one who can us life.

For example, I can worship my family as an idol. It's actually very easy. I'm supposed to worship God and serve and nurture and build up my family. But when I idolize my family, I start expecting spiritual support and nourishment from my wife and children that no human being on this earth is going to be able to give me. In the same way, again, I can latch on to ideas, political movements, fads. None of these created things can give

me the life and power and security and confidence I'm looking for. When I'm looking for life and power in all these created things, it follows that I'm always restless and frustrated and disappointed and fearful, because none of it can satisfy the longing that God has put in me for *him*. Without God, my life becomes a never-ending game of trying to control everything, but I end up a slave to my false gods. The scary thing about our world today is how *quickly* we can switch to some new false god that'll satisfy our immediate needs. That's a huge challenge for the church in our world today. It's so easy for us, like children in a department store, to skip from one diversion to the next. We can dig a deep hole for ourselves before we realize how lost we are.

For forty years in the desert, Israel kept wandering off, unable to trust God, the source of their lives, who had brought them out of slavery and promised them a future. God was saying "I saved you, and now I'm with you to stay. And I give you freedom. Just stick with me, trust me as you walk in the wilderness." But, the world was hard and they wanted immediate security, quick satisfaction. They didn't want to face the challenge of being truly free under God's rule. Freedom for a Christian is to follow a Lord who is leading us beyond the temporary securities of this world all the time. He's calling us away from our false gods, to trust him alone. He promises: as we keep going deeper in that relationship of trust in God, we find out...it's amazing. It's beautiful. It's freedom.

Because in Jesus, we know we have this God who will give everything he has for one single child. That's the truth today's gospel about the lost sheep gives us. This gospel is about God's amazing love, and it's the love that has led Christians out into the world for all these centuries, telling everybody about our awesome God. Who will sacrifice all his divine power, he'll give away his whole kingdom, just to set one person free from idolatry. He would sacrifice his whole being so that just one person in this room can experience the joy of being in a free, living, ongoing, trusting relationship with him. That's the love that you and I can depend on every day. Our shepherd will leave everything to find one sheep. His love completely overflows our expectations. We don't deserve it. It blows apart every conception we have of justice or fairness or balance or equality.

A big temptation for the church in today's world is that we're tempted to say, "some people like me have got Jesus—those people over there have their beliefs. Leave them in their place, we'll stay in ours." When you read today's gospel, doesn't that attitude become inconceivable? Where's the love in this common attitude today, of letting the lost sheep die? What about the shepherd who leaves 99 sheep behind to go save just one?

And it also struck me this week, when Jesus says: "There is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." It struck me: If I don't think I need to repent—if I don't think there's anything really all that wrong with me in the first place—obviously I'm not likely to go out telling other people what Jesus has done for me.

But people who know there's no future except through Christ, people who know that each breath they're breathing has been paid for by the blood and sacrifice of Jesus—those

people, yes, are going to do what the shepherd does in the gospel lesson. They know they don't deserve what they've been given, and because of that, they'll do everything they can to give that gift away to other people. And they won't care who those other people are—what they look like, talk like, or where they're from.

There's a false version of freedom—a very popular version today—it's a freedom where we're running from one thing to the next, always looking through the department store, searching for a feeling and a fulfillment on our own terms...which we can never find. In Christ, praise God, we are free of that prison. The Father who loves us has taken us up in his arms in Christ, and will never let his precious children go. Being caught up and held tight in those arms...that's where freedom begins. That's where you and I are transformed into good shepherds, who go looking for lost sheep.