

## **SERMON: Sunday – 11 September 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **Lost and Found**

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

He was accused of welcoming sinners and eating with them. Tax collectors and sinners were drawn to him whilst the self righteous ones muttered their words of accusation.

The sinners knew their need to change whilst the righteous saw no such need.

It was time to tell a parable. A parable about searching and looking and finding and rejoicing.

I was lost but Jesus found me  
Found the sheep that went astray;  
Raised me up and gently led me,  
Back into the narrow way.  
Yes I'll sing the wondrous story ....

The writer of Spill The Beans wrote this week that,  
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“The Church in many parts has found itself grappling with the need for repentance and a refocussing on Jesus and the Way: when apologising for how the institution of the Church benefited monetarily from slavery, for its part in the terrible violence inflicted on women during witchcraft trials, for the harm done by the Church to the LGBTIQ+ community, for the failure of some denominations to do the right thing when confronted with abuse allegations. Perhaps it is the Church itself today that is in need of being found, for it has been too often lost. What part might we play in that process?”

Like Luke, the Gospel of Matthew speaks of large crowds following Jesus and Jesus announces to them in the Sermon on the Mount that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:3

In the crowds that followed Jesus were tax collectors, sinners, demon possessed, and the sick in body and mind.

For the kingdom of heaven to be announced to them, and said by Jesus to be among them, would have been words of healing and liberation as much then as they are to us here and now today.

The kingdom of heaven is within you.

Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote a blog post recently on the beatitudes and said this:

“don’t wait until you feel as though you have met the conditions of being holy. Trust that Jesus knows what he is doing. You are already holy. Don't try and be it. Know that you already are it. And then, for the love of God, take that seriously. The world needs it. You need it.”

I think that’s an important word to hear because if we are going to take seriously God’s mission in the world then we need to have a healthy acceptance of what it means to be the new creation in Christ with all of the inherent holiness that comes from that being.

To paraphrase what was just quoted, You are already holy. Stop striving to be it.

Yes its good to have a healthy appreciation of our sinfulness but only in order to recognise how great is God’s grace and mercy. As Paul wrote to Timothy,

“I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus..... I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life”.

1 Timothy 1:13-16

The paradox of the Gospel is that we are both sinner and saint. We hold the two in a healthy tension.

As Jesus put it, let the weeds and the wheat both grow together. We are each like a field of weeds and wheat, just like everyone and everything is. Everything is a mixed bag, a combination of good and bad. We are not all weeds, but we are not all wheat, either. We have to learn, even now, to accept and forgive this mixed bag of reality in ourselves and in everybody else.

And when we stray from that truth of our inherent holiness and become lost, Christ, the Truth, seeks us out; doesn’t stop looking for us and is ever present whenever we give it a moment’s proper thought; whenever we contemplate it or meet it in silence.

This holy perseverance of the Truth seeking us, is, I think, what Jesus is trying to convince us is a key aspect of God's nature and the reign of God.

The Good Shepherd doesn't give up on his sheep but seeks and seeks and seeks until all are found. Even 1 in 100 is not to be lost in the economy of heaven. 1% may be written off in the economies of capitalism but not so with God. Every one counts. Sinners become saints in the good economy of God's mercy.

And so if everyone counts how will that inform our mission? What difference will that make to the daily encounters we have with people who have strayed away from the truth about God? How can we be truthful ambassadors of this God who seeks and rescues the lost? And who celebrates whenever even one turns back?

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We might borrow the title of Nadia's latest book, "Accidental Saints: Finding God in all the Wrong People", to remind us of the limitless extent to which God seeks and can be found.

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Howard Thurman wrote a commentary on the parable of the lost sheep in which he said, "Jesus says that God is like the shepherd, seeking always to find those who are out of community with their fellows, and when they have found it, when they have found their community with their fellows, then all the world seems to fit back into place, and life takes on a new meaning. . . ".  
Howard Thurman, Sermons on the Parables

The reign of God is that community and we are invited to widen its circle and rejoice in seeing God's grace at work in all things.