

Text: Luke 15:1-10
Title: Relentlessly Pursued
Date: 09.11.22
Roger Allen Nelson

Anne Lamott, an agnostic-alcoholic, describes coming to faith as being chased by a little cat. She hesitated responding for a long time because she knew what would happen. “You let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever.”

As it turns out, Anne went regularly to a raggedy little church near the flea market. One Sunday the sermon was “ridiculous,” but the last song was so deep, raw, and pure that Anne felt like she couldn’t escape. She began to cry before the benediction, left the service, and ran home feeling the little cat nipping at her heels. She slammed the door to her house boat, hung her head, cursed, took a deep breath and said aloud, “All right. You can come in.”

Rachel Hewitt was a church lady. If First Reformed was open, she was there. Her late husband was a military officer; living all over the world, Rachel found sustaining community in base camp churches. She loved Sunday school, scripture, and hats on Easter. She carried herself with an unmatched-graceful-dignity and kindness. Every time I’d preach, Rachel would track me down with a question. I welcomed every conversation.

Rachel sat in a center-aisle-seat, just a few rows back, and on most Sundays something in the singing of a hymn would cause tears to well up in her eyes and slip down her cheeks. When I asked about it, she told me of her heart breaking because her adult children weren’t going to church. She wept because in her mind her children hadn’t welcomed in the pursuing kitten.

Dear friends, Frederick Buechner writes that,

A parable is a little story with a large point... With parables and jokes both, if you’ve got to have them explained, don’t bother.

But “explaining” the parables in this morning’s text just might help shed a little light on Anne’s story and Rachel’s story and help us make sense of our own.

Therefore....

Jesus is surrounded by run-of-the-mill sinners and the religiously righteous – the law-breakers and law-keepers. True to form, the Pharisees sneer that Jesus repeatedly welcomed these sinners. And, the word here is not just welcome, like greeting one at the door, but welcoming as taking one into your arms.

So, Jesus tells two parables, actually three because the parable of the prodigal son immediately follows, but for our purposes this morning, two parables.

The thematic hook here is the relentless pursuit of what’s lost. The shepherd risks losing the ninety-nine in order to find the one. And, the woman drops the nine coins in order to find the one.

It's no way to run a ranch or a bank, but the shepherd and the woman single-mindedly search until they find what they've lost. And in the finding, there's great celebration: friends and neighbors are called, mirth and merrymaking follow. Heaven itself rejoices and angels join the chorus. All of this because the what was lost was found.

These two parables compliment Anne LaMott's story. To mix animal metaphors, God doggedly chased her down, wore her out, and won her over. God found what was lost. Thanks be to God.

However, it seems worth noting that the sheep and the coin already belong to the shepherd and the woman. These are not images of conversion; these are images of reclamation. God relentlessly reclaims what wandered off, ran away, slipped through the cracks, got stuck between the sofa cushions, or rolled under the dresser. But the lost sheep always belonged to the shepherd; the lost coin was already the woman's....

When emailing about the baptism of Asher, Erica included me in an invitation she sent to her family. The invitation didn't include references to cute kitties or irrepressible puppies, but there were these few lines:

I've often joked (to Jon) that infant baptism is 'my whole theology.' It's a tradition in the church that I grew up in, but the reason it's so meaningful to me is because of what it symbolizes: that before we've done anything at all, no matter who we become, God chooses us. I believe so deeply in a God that moves towards us — that meets us in our darkest moments, that widens the table, that offers unimaginable grace. It has always been our prayer that Asher will know undoubtedly that he is loved, safe, accepted, and chosen for exactly who he was created to be. We're excited to celebrate this symbol of that kind of belonging

Dear friends, there was great joy in heaven when Anne LaMott opened her heart's door, let Jesus in, and began the journey to sobriety – eventually becoming a remarkable gift as a spiritual writer. But, throughout her whole journey she belonged to God. God was always present – patiently and persistently tracking her down. Never giving up. Never letting go. Our brokenness, our lost-ness, our distance doesn't dismiss or diminish our belonging God.

True for Anne.

True for Asher.

True for you and me.

Thanks be to God.

And, I repeatedly told Rachel the same....

God relentlessly pursues what belongs to him.

There's no time table,

there's no end to the story,

there are no barriers that hinder God from claiming his children.

Yes, absolutely, opening the door, living a life of grateful obedience in response to God's pursuit, is a richer-fuller-more-faithful-way to live, and we want that for our loved ones, but our response doesn't deter God....

I've done my fair share of funerals. I've done funerals for friends, for those I'd never met, for saints, and for scoundrels. I've buried babies in boxes, no bigger than a shoe box, and folks in their late nineties. I've done funerals in sanctuaries with standing room only crowds and at graveside with no one but the caretaker, the mortician, and the gravedigger.

On every occasion I tried to be honest about the person's life and honest about the gospel. None of us know the cracks and crevices of another's hearts, and I don't pretend for a minute to "know" what happens or where we go after we die.

But I trust in the grace of God in Jesus Christ. I trust in a God who makes the first move toward us and the last. I trust in a God who doesn't stop searching for the last lost sheep or a forgotten penny. Our faith is not in our wisdom, courage, or goodness, but in God's relentless pursuit. Our faith is not in how well we lived, or much we believed, but in how we belong to God.

True for Anne.

True for Asher.

True for Rachel and her children.

True for you and me.

Thanks be to God.

Jesus calls for repentance in response to God's pursuit. Our text reads:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathered around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable...

Who is the "them?"

To whom does Jesus tell the parable?

Biblical scholars think that the antecedent to "them" is the Pharisees. Jesus turns to the religiously certain and tells them stories of the lost being found. Maybe the sinners already knew they were lost and in telling the parables Jesus is trying to pry loose the floorboards of religious confidence. As if to say, all that matters is being lost and then found.

Dear friends, part of repentance is letting go of our confidence in a religious apparatus. In part, repentance is admitting that we don't have it all nailed down, that we don't have all the answers. Repentance makes space for faith, not as doctrinal certainty but as deep trust in God. Because all we have to offer is our lost-ness. All we have to offer our dead-ness.

Faith is not certainty. In fact, some uncertainty, some question, some doubt, some humility makes space for faith. Buechner describes doubt as “the ants in the paints of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”

Our confidence is not in the quality of our faith, but in belonging to God.

Our comfort is not in being right, but in belonging to God.

Therefore, in response to God’s grace in Christ, let us offer our hearts to God, turn from our sins, and even in repenting of a religious-righteousness may we know a deep trust.

Robert Farrar Capon puts it this way:

A lost sheep is, for all practical purposes, a dead sheep; a lost coin is likewise a dead asset. These parables, therefore, are far from being exhortations to repentance. They are emphatically not stories designed to convince us that if we will wind ourselves up to some acceptable level of moral and/or spiritual improvement, God will then forgive us; rather they are parables about God’s determination to move before we do – in short, to make lost-ness and death the only tickets we need to the Supper of the Lamb.

Tune your harp

Cue the angels.

Put on your dancing shoes.

Let the rejoicing begin.

God picks up the lost coin.

God gathers in the lost sheep.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.