

**Sermon for September 11, 2016 (Proper 19, Year C)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Psalm 23; Luke 15:1-10

Title: There Is Joy

Once there was a famous explorer who became lost in the Saharan desert. He survived the ordeal and later, when he was explaining the episode to a gathering at the Royal Geographic Society in London, he told how, in despair, he had knelt down in the sand and cried out to God for help.

Someone in the audience asked, "And did God answer your prayer?"

"Oh no!" the man explained. "Before God could do anything at all, a truck came over the dune and gave me a ride to safety!"

My friends: what does it mean to be lost?
And HOW does God help those who ARE lost?

I am so glad that we are together on this day, on this Kick-Off Sunday.
It is good that we can launch together into another year of service and mission, learning and discovery, caring and connecting.

I can think of no better objective in life than of doing this kind of work together with friends and neighbors who share a common commitment to finding the lost and to bringing them back home.

But what does it mean to be lost?

If you grew up in a southern or evangelical tradition, then you probably are quite familiar with this term and you may even have a visceral reaction to it!

It can be quite loaded with layers of meaning, much of which is highly judgmental.

The primary problem with thinking and speaking of the lost in this way is that it creates the façade that there are two types of people: the lost sinners who need help, and the saved righteous ones who have got it together.

And, of course, all those who think and speak in these terms always – ALWAYS! - places themselves in the camp of the “good guys”, the righteous ones who surely are saved and need no repentance.

The “lost ones” are those out there, the others, the ones who don’t fit.

The “lost” are the ones who had better get their act together, or else.

This is a trap which far too many Christians have fallen into.

But there is a better way!

Where do we need to look to find the corrective to this kind of dualistic thinking?

Where do we find the perspective to balance the picture?

We need to look no further than the apostle Paul!

In our first reading today, Paul makes an astounding statement. Do you remember?

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost” (1 Tim. 1:15).

What does it mean to be lost?

In one sense, everyone alive is lost! We ALL struggle to know what to do, to know where to go. We ALL struggle to re-connect with God, and to STAY connected to God in the midst of a busy and difficult life. We ALL struggle to fear no evil by trusting in the goodness and mercy of God.

The tax collectors and sinners gathered around Jesus, because they could tell that he was whole and complete and connected in a way that they wanted too!

In a way that everyone wants.

So, if this is true, then how does God help those who are lost?

Surely God can act in more ways than you can imagine, but more often than not, God chooses to act in harmony with humans – like the truck which was driven over the dune at the right moment.

This is what the Church is all about! It’s about learning together, and helping one another, to stay connected to God so that WE might act in harmony with what God wants.

And what God wants is to bring EVERYONE back to our rightful and natural home. That's what Church is all about. That what's Saint Mary's is all about. And it means that we have life-saving and world-altering work ahead of us.

Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit over the last several months, your parish leadership believes that we have identified 4 directions of growth for the life-saving work of this parish community.

They are listed on the golden insert in your bulletin.

And yes, I misspelled one of the very first words!

But regardless, you'll see right away that these 4 directions are not unique to us. The Vestry and I did not create these ideas. They are common to many different congregations, and they are common to statements of intention that Saint Mary's has produced in the past.

But they are important for us – right here and right now – at this moment in time. They provide clarity for the areas in our common life where we must focus our time, attention and resources – if we are to be faithful to the Spirit's movement right now.

So please take a look at that insert, because we are going to read these 4 directions together. Ready? Number One:

1. Grow our Engagement with Children and Youth.
2. Grow our Intentional Opportunities for Deeper Connection with God and One Another.
3. Grow in Compassionate Care for Those Struggling.
4. Grow in Welcoming Those Seeking God.

Each of these directional marks, and everything that we do together as the Body of Christ, is rooted in God's compassionate and diligent mission of seeking the lost and bringing us back home.

These 4 directions apply to everything that we do together as a Christian community.

Whether you are an Office Angel who comes in and helps to prepare the Sunday bulletins, or you are a Souper Supper worker who serves food to our dinner guests

every other Friday night, or you are on the Altar Guild and help to prepare the Lord's Table for our celebrations – no matter what part you play in this community, you can be aware of these four directions and ask yourself these questions:

How am I engaging more children and youth in this ministry?

How am I being intentional about deepening connections with God and those around me?

How am I caring for those who are struggling – either among ourselves or in the broader community?

How am I right now welcoming those who are seeking for God in their lives?

Each one of us can ask these questions and join in growing in each of these 4 directions.

And IF we are faithful in doing this work with diligence and perseverance, do you know what will be the result?

The Lord tells us right in these parables.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of these stories in Luke's Gospel is the claim that the heaven and the angels of God rejoice every time a lost one, a sinner, repents and returns home.

What a powerful vision! Consider what this might mean!

That the presence of God is continuously surrounded by joy-filled celebration, for such changes in the hearts and lives of human beings take place all the time, every minute of every day.

What a positive, affirming vision of reality! And it gives me hope.

That even though life in this world can be so tough, so difficult and demanding...

Even though our bodies break down and decay, and are affected by disease...

Even though there will always be hate-filled people who seek to destroy and who kill innocent people...

Yet even still, "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

THERE IS JOY! Continuous, overflowing joy all around us in the heavens when lives are changed and connected to the grace of God.

Don't you want to be part of that kind of joy?

Don't you want to live this life knowing that YOU are participating in the joy of God as human lives are put back together and brought back home? Absolutely, I DO!

Life is short – far too short for arguing or complaining or judging, far too short for anger or fear or hatred. But life is never too short for joy!

So where do you fit in the future of Saint Mary's? Do you see yourself being called to walk with God in one of these 4 specific directions? Then write your name!

We believe that the Holy Spirit speaks through ALL of the Body of Christ, because each one of us has received that Spirit.

So YOUR thoughts and dreams and ideas matter.

Perhaps you have a specific vision of how we might welcome those seeking God in their lives. Write it down briefly, and add your name so that we can follow up with a more in-depth conversation.

We are in this together. And we are in this to participate in the joy of the only God, to whom be honor and glory, forever and ever. Amen!

Blessing

May the Creator God, who clothes the flowers of the field and feeds the birds of the air, opens our eyes to the abundance all around us. AMEN.

May the Redeemer Christ, who fed thousands and healed the sick, show you how to use your hands for good. AMEN.

May the Energizing Holy Spirit, who formed the world out of chaos, form us in the likeness of Christ to renew the face of the earth. AMEN.

And the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with you now and remain with you always. AMEN.