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September 16, 2007

Proper 19c

Exodus 32:1, 7-14

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

Over the past few weeks it seems as if I have spent more time than usual looking for things that I have lost. Now, as you know, losing things is not all that uncommon for me. Almost everyday I manage to lose something. In fact, when I bought a new laptop this summer, I understand that bets were made regarding how long it would be before I lost it.

I can proudly say that I still have my laptop. But, it seems that I have lost just about everything else. Back in June I lost my cell phone. In August I lost train tickets. And, this past week, I lost my calendar. My 2008 calendar! 2008 is still months away, and already I have lost my calendar.

I have to confess that I am not proud of myself when I lose things. I revert to some pretty childish behavior. When I lose things that I come close to throwing a temper tantrum. Now I don't stomp my feet, or hold my breath, or yell and scream.....but...I come as close to these things as any 50 year old man should come. When I lose things, I face the truth that it is probably time for me to grow up.

And of course, the absurdity of my tantrums is that nothing that I lose is ever really irreplaceable. I lose my cell phone, I make a phone call, and its delivered, maybe even with an upgrade in 3 days. I lose my train tickets, and I go to the station and get them replaced...for a price...yes, but still they are replaced. I lose next year's calendar and I send for another one. It is certainly inconvenient to lose things, and sometimes it costs money to replace the things I have lost. But, in truth, everything I have can be replaced. My calendar, my cell phone, train tickets, laptops, car, clothes, keys, wallets, even our house can be replaced. In truth the only things in my life that are irreplaceable are my relationships: my wife, my children, my family and friends. Isn't it sad, that these irreplaceable gifts are the things I often take so for granted. While, too often when I lose things I have that are replaceable I take out my frustration on the people that can never be replaced.

In our Scriptures readings this morning we find some things that are irreplaceable.

In Exodus, Moses is delayed on the mountain. The people become anxious and afraid. They fear that they have lost Moses, and in losing Moses, they fear they have lost the Lord who spoke through him. They seek to replace the Lord with a golden calf. The golden calf was a symbol of youth, of strength and of fertility. They believe that they can replace the Lord who freed them with another god. Yet, no other God can keep them free; no other God can give them life. In fact, the truth is that any god, but the LORD will destroy them. The Lord is furious with Israel, and threatens to destroy them. The Lord threatens to treat them as any other god would. Moses intercedes with the LORD. "Show them, and show the Egyptians that you are not like any other God. Show the world, that you alone are a God of mercy. You alone are a God who forgives. You are a God who cannot be replaced."

In the Gospel, Jesus tells parables which speak of God. God is a shepherd who searches for a lost sheep until it is found. God is a woman who sweeps the house, who searches diligently for the lost coin until she finds it. That Jesus would use a shepherd and a woman as images of God would surely have scandalized the Pharisees. Shepherds were considered by many to be unclean, and women property. But Jesus uses them to teach about God's relationship with God's people. For the shepherd, and for the woman, the lost sheep and the lost coin are irreplaceable. For God, any one who is lost is irreplaceable. This is why Jesus feasts with tax collectors and prostitutes. This is why Jesus welcomes sinners. For God, each and every one of them is irreplaceable. When they are found, God rejoices.

Paul rejoices in gratitude, because he was a man of violence, a persecutor, a blasphemer. He persecuted followers of Jesus. He stood by as Christians were killed. He sought to imprison those who followed Jesus. He rejoices because even though he was foremost of the sinners, God found him irreplaceable, and saved him.

Dear friends, do you realize that you are irreplaceable to God. God searches for you as a shepherd for a lost sheep, as a woman for a lost coin. God will do whatever God has to do to find you. You are precious to God: each and every one of us. No matter what we have done. No matter how lost we have become, we are precious to God. God will search for you until God finds you. You are irreplaceable.

The Eucharist we celebrate each Sunday is a banquet God offers to celebrate that we who were lost have been found. The people who gather around this table are those sheep, those coins that have been found. Every one gathered around this table is here because they are irreplaceable to God.

After we feast, we are sent forth to go into the wilderness of this world and find those who are still lost. The world is a wilderness in which many are lost. They are lost in addictions, lost in violence, lost in despair. The world is a wilderness in which many are lost in poverty, in physical or mental illness, in hopelessness. All who are lost are irreplaceable to Jesus. Jesus sends us to find them, and welcome them. Jesus sends us out to bring them with us to the feast.

So dear friends remember, every “thing” we have is replaceable. The people in our life are not. May we never take for granted the people in our life who can never be replaced. May we always be grateful for them. May we remember that God is also not replaceable. When we try to replace God with our modern day “golden calves”: wealth, pleasure, weapons, sports, or any of the other addictions we “worship”, they will ultimately destroy us. False gods can never replace the Lord. May we give thanks that each one of us, each one of you is precious to God. So precious, so irreplaceable that God will do whatever God needs to do to find you when you get lost. And dear friends, may we always remember, that the feast will be complete when all sinners have been forgiven, all the broken have been healed, and when all the lost have been found.