

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who welcomes and yes, even eats with sinners, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

PJ and I used to like to go to concerts, a lot... We'd attend about 6 or 8 every year. Over the years we've learned to make a note of where we parked the car. We learned that through the school of hard knocks. In the early years, after parking we'd rush into the event arena so we could find our seats, get a soft drink and perhaps check out the merchandise before the show began. We were in such a big hurry to get inside we would forget where we parked the car. I remember several times wandering around in the parking lot for what seemed like 40 years in the wilderness until we finally found that lost car. We rejoiced because what was lost had now been found... That happy feeling of finally getting to sit in our vehicle and drive home was pure joy. Have you ever lost something important and had to look for a very long time before finally discovering where you left it? If so, you know the joy I'm talking about.

I remember one time when our children were young, PJ was working and I had taken all three of our children to Wal-Mart. For some reason Trevor wasn't happy. I don't remember why, but he ran off and I couldn't find him anywhere in the store. I looked in the toy department and in the video games. I even looked in the boys clothing, but he was no where to be found. I think he was in fifth grade, so, about 11 years old. As I searched up and down the aisles I began to panic.

Where could he have gone? Did someone kidnap him? After searching the store from end to end I finally spoke to a manager. They immediately called an “Adam Alert.” Every store employee began searching and eventually the police were called. They expanded the search to the area outside the store and finally found him in an adjacent field just wandering around like nothing serious was happening. When the police officer returned Trevor to me, I felt so relieved and full of joy. I profusely thanked the police officer and the manager of the store. Only after getting all three kids loaded into my car did I start to feel ashamed and guilty for not keeping a closer watch on my son. Then it began to sink in. I was going to have to tell PJ and my joy was pretty short lived...

In our Gospel text for today Jesus was answering the grumbling of the religious leaders who were showing their disdain toward Him because He was welcoming and eating with tax collectors and sinners. They were not happy that Jesus was inviting such scoundrels into his presence. Instead of becoming defensive, Jesus told them three parables about lost stuff; a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a very loving Father. If I read these parables correctly, Jesus seems to be saying it's more than simply welcoming and eating with them... In all three parables that which was lost was being actively sought out by the one who lost it. The shepherd didn't just stay with his flock and wait for the lost sheep to return. He left the other 99 sheep out in the wilderness, where the wolves might have

gotten them, to go in search of the one who had wandered off. In the second parable, the lady searched and swept the floors. She looked under the furniture and in the cushions and pillows until she found her coin. In the third parable, the father must have been watching every day for his son to return because Jesus says he saw his son while he was still far off he ran to him and welcomed him.

This sounds a lot like our Mission Statement. You know the closing line of Liturgy we repeat every time we gather for worship. In Christ's love we seek, welcome, and serve all... Our mission, like these parables, begins with us actively searching for those who have wandered off, like the lost sheep. Our mission compels us to look for the lost and alone. I wonder if we're really 100 percent invested in this mission of ours. It's been really difficult this past year with Covid stay at home orders, social distancing, and the fear of catching a disease that has wiped out well over 500,000 of our fellow Americans and over 2.5 million world-wide. I get that... Our mission isn't always safe and it's never easy...

Maybe we're not as equipped as some other Churches to deal with the whole seeking out the lost evangelism mission... That doesn't give us a pass. Every follower of Jesus has that same mission, to call sinners into the body of Christ. That doesn't mean just those vague people out there who we don't know... You can be sitting in these very pews right here every week and still be lost. In fact, I might venture to say that's the very reason some of you are here week after

week—because you know you’re lost and are urgently seeking some word of hope amid all the despair in our world. For some others, the children you raised right here in this Church might be the ones you’re called to bring back into the fold. The prophet Isaiah wrote, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6 NRS). People can be lost in many ways. Some might be lost in a pile of overdue bills while being laid off... Another might be lost in grief over the death of a loved one. Some are lost in the midst of marital strife or separation or even divorce. Many times in my Air Force life I felt lost when we had to uproot our family, leave our friends and start life over again in a new place. Many of us are at a certain age where our health is uncertain and we don’t know where to turn for help. Many more are simply lost in the myriad of life’s tasks and chores.

Sometimes it’s our fault that someone is lost... We don’t like to hear that—I don’t like to hear that because it means I didn’t care enough or that I was too judgmental. That’s a hard pill to swallow... If others are lost because of our failure to help them find their way, then certainly we need to examine any indifference we have to the lost and why it is there. These parables convict me and I’m pretty certain I’m not alone... It’s easy to make excuses... I’m an expert at it... I’m so busy studying and writing sermons... I have to review and edit the bulletin and create the worship slides. I don’t have time to worry about the lost

ones because I have all this other work to do... Sometimes it's more insidious. Maybe I just think that if we bring in more of these lost repentant sinners I'll just have that much more work to do... My list of excuses is endless... We all have them. I'm not judging your efforts at seeking out the lost, because I'm not any better.

Let's put all our excuses aside for a moment. It comes down to our integrity. Do we actually do what we say we're going to do, seek, welcome, and serve. I think we've got the serving down pretty well, but our mission begins with seeking the lost ones, how are we doing at that? In order to seek the lost we need to get better at discovering all of our excuses that keep us stuck right here where we are. That's one reason we begin most Worship services with our confession. Lent is the time of year we examine ourselves and hopefully uncover our shortcomings so God can heal us. We're all lost and wounded and filled with a dozen excuses for why we're not able to seek the lost ones, but we're all also forgiven and sent on that very mission. Maybe you've tried talking to your family member who has stopped attending Church and your efforts have been rejected. Maybe they've been hurt by something I or someone else in the Church has said or done, or not done. None of us is perfect. Maybe all they need is one more nudge... It's time to forgive and forget past sins and mistakes. It's time to repent and return to the Lord your God...

We're all like lost sheep who have wandered away. None of us is any better or different. Thank God for our Savior, Jesus, who took on our sin and bore the pain for our wrongs. May the Lord of the lost find you and restore you to His sheepfold and in thanksgiving and gratitude for all Jesus has done for you now is the time for you to share the joy that's within you! May we learn to seek out those who are lost, even if they are part of our own families and bring them back into the family of our Savior Jesus. May the same God who rejoiced when the prodigal son returned, rejoice when we turn back to God in our own confession and repentance and may we all join the chorus of heaven every time a lost one is found. Amen.