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The 14th Sunday after Pentecost

The Rev. Laurel Coote

St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church

In her book: *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, Nadia Bolz-Weber writes: “Those most qualified to speak the gospel are those who truly know how unqualified they are to speak the gospel.”

Exactly what St. Paul was saying to Timothy, except that he wasn't speaking about someone else, over there. As if he had looked in the mirror, Paul was talking about himself: an ignorant non-believer, and a zealous persecutor of the followers of Jesus, Paul knew others would say he was not qualified to preach the Gospel. He didn't measure up. Except, that by God's grace and Christ's choosing, he did.

Jesus called the twelve to join him in ministry, to help him do the work of sharing the gospel — a story of a love so profound that no one was or would be excluded. And yet, although they followed, they often struggled. They struggled when Jesus, breaking with social rules, touched and healed the unclean leper; they struggled when he willingly accepted anointing from a prostitute, a woman deemed sinful; they struggled as they held in conflict all they had been taught (that one was to pity, even help the afflicted, the poor, the sinner, but also to keep them at a distance) with all that Jesus was now teaching them: that no one is outside the realm of God's reach.

And here in today's Gospel, we find Jesus again in the presence of the less than desirable — sinners and tax collectors — as religious leaders observe and condemn his actions. Perhaps they thought that Jesus was an idiot; or that he had no idea of who these people were or the damage they had done. Perhaps his actions were confronting, because they demonstrated a response to God's call to love neighbor as self in a way that they had never desired, nor imagined? Maybe his breaking of the religious laws that regularly set people apart from community was most confronting of all; because it can be pretty easy to stay tucked in behind the walls of the temple, safe from threat of the other.

Fr. Greg Boyle, author of *Tattoos on the Heart*, and founder of Homeboy Industries notes: “If you read Scripture scholar Marcus Borg and go to the index in search of 'sinner,' it'll say, 'see outcast.' This was a social grouping of people who felt wholly unacceptable. The world had deemed them disgraceful and shameful, and this toxic shame... was brought inside and given a home in the outcast. [But] Jesus' strategy is a simple one: He eats with them. Precisely to those paralyzed in this toxic shame, Jesus says, 'I will eat with you.' He goes where love has not yet arrived, and he 'gets his grub on.' Eating with outcasts rendered them acceptable.”

Paul understood what it was to have toxic shame, but rather than be consumed by it, he uses it as fuel for ministry. Like Jesus choosing to eat with the outcast; Jesus called Paul — the enemy of the movement — to follow, to lead, and to speak the gospel. He renders Paul acceptable, even when his disciples and others who have witnessed Paul's actions do not. And Paul never forgets this grace. Paul never forgets the moment when he was the lost, the one gone astray, who had been found and restored to community.

Paul's testimony gives us permission to acknowledge our own brokenness, shortcomings or mistakes, or ways of being that we imagine, or that others would tell us, disallow us belonging in the family of God. And we all need to hear that good news. We all need to be reminded that we are cherished, seen, and valued — that we matter.

This is why Christ came into the world—to seek and find the lost, the broken, the discounted — so that not only would we each know and believe that we are beloved and cherished, but that in knowing and believing this, we too would become seekers of the lost, broken and discounted. Jesus calls us to go where love has not yet arrived, and to render as acceptable each person we encounter.

It is difficult to discern in our parables today if the emphasis is more on the lost or the seeker. 100 sheep, 99 safe within the gates, one lost on the outside; 10 silver coins, 9 at hand but one missing. With the bulk of the sheep or the coins in hand, why does what's missing matter? While what is lost matters, without the one who seeks, the one who sees the value in the lost, the story would not have resolution nor cause for celebration.

From the time we are small, we are taught to count. Counting is a skill that sets a foundation for life. Number symbols and words help us to create order, and to define value. Although numbers can seem definitive and objective (and perhaps mathematicians would tell you they are) humans often disagree as to whether a numeric value, say the number 1, is a good thing or a bad thing.

Twenty one years ago, the deadliest terrorist attack in the world took place here in the United States. During the September 11, 2001 attacks, 2,977 people were killed, 19 hijackers committed murder–suicide, and more than 25,000 others were injured. But these definitive numbers do not speak to the ripple effect of the event, or to the thousands, or millions of lives impacted in some way. The numbers put the story in perspective, reminding us all of the significance of what happened on that day, yet the numbers do not tell the whole story. The story goes on, even to today. While our memorials and ringing of bells recall to us those lost, we must not lose sight of those who remain: survivors, family members, volunteers, co-workers and friends — many profoundly impacted by an event outside of their control, and who have known what it feels like to be outside the fold, outside of community.

The good news that can take us forward in times of tragedy or great loss is this: Each one of us matters. Jesus makes this so very clear. Yet a community without all of us is incomplete. We are not whole. The invitation is, like Jesus, to seek, find and restore those who are lost, who are outside the fold, who have been cast outside of community. This is where Jesus wants us to set our sights — these are the numbers Jesus wants us to count. Who in our community is missing? Who has been left out, or failed to be invited in, or back?

When I arrived here in the midst of Covid, my desire was to reach out and connect to every member of the parish. Although my intentions were good, I have failed and there are still some members of St. Dunstan's that I have yet to meet, and some that have not yet returned to church post-pandemic. I wonder if there is someone you've missed, and what might happen if you were to join me in reaching out with a simple phone call, or a visit, or a note that lets them know that they are missed, that we long for them to return?

We may think that we are unqualified to speak the gospel, that we are not wise enough or sufficient to proclaim God's love to others. Jesus says otherwise. Like Paul, we each come with a story of who we are or who we have been. And like Paul, it is our brokenness, our not-perfect-ness that makes us uniquely us and perfectly poised to speak the gospel. For no story is so unworthy, so terrible, that God will not call upon us to further God's kingdom. We matter because we exist. Not because of who we are, or what we have done, but simply, because we are. (Max Lucado Paraphrase). And our call is to let others know the same. Who in your life needs to know that they matter today?