

Luke 15:1-10

September 11, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!
Amen.

There is a movie Matt and I like called *Coach Carter* starring Samuel L. Jackson who plays Coach Ken Carter. Carter is a successful business man who accepts the head coaching position of a high school boys' basketball team in a very poor area of Richmond, California – the same school where Carter was a star basketball player. He inherits a program which has consistently failed to win games. After a few hurdles, resistance, and time the tide begins to turn and the team begins to win – not just one or two but several games in a row. All seems to be well until Coach Carter begins to sense the success has gone to the boys' heads. Quickly, the team begins to display a disrespect for their opponents and it becomes all about us – look at how good we are or even how great I am that begins to drive a wedge through the team. In somewhat of a humorous scene during scrimmage one day, Coach Carter walks out onto the floor, calls for one of the boys to pass him the ball and then goes onto make a basket and immediately begins to dance around the court and yell something to the effect of, "Oh yeah, look at me. I did that. I made that shot." He exaggerates a bit but the point is made loud and clear. Now, this movie highlights many other important themes and even one which may be applicable to our gospel passage this morning – that all of the youth in this high school matter, that all are entitled to chance, that none should be given up on – just like the good Shepherd who will not let go of that one lost sheep.

That would make a fine sermon and certainly this text has and will continue to be preached in that capacity. There is no doubt that message has brought countless good news to so many people over the years and I suspect to each of us at one point or another in our life when we, too, have become lost. Perhaps, some of us today even come with that innate feeling of being lost, standing outside of God's all-encompassing love and grace, feeling unworthy to approach God because of some wrong we have done, or simply feeling overwhelmed and consumed by whatever may be going on in our lives that we simply can't see beyond the horizon and wonder if we will ever be able to cut through the thick fog we are in – perhaps an illness or debt, perhaps unemployment or the death of a loved one, perhaps depression or loneliness, or perhaps the struggles, frustrations, aches and pains which simply come as we age and our bodies grow more weary day after day. We all get lost along the way and need the saving hand of God to guide us safely back. We all need the redeeming work of Jesus Christ to save us from the sin that separates us from Him.

And embedded in that is a point to lift up this morning in these parables that Jesus tells. That a parable first and foremost is about God. They are about what God is doing. God is the searching Shepherd and the seeking woman. God is the primary actor. We are conditioned by a "me" first culture to immediately read a text and look at what it means for us. What does this say to me? Where am I at in the text? Am I one of the Pharisees? Am I the lost sheep? Am I the shepherd or the woman? This is even

how so many view the church? What's in it for me? What am I going to get out of going to church? In the words of Reverend Will Willimon:

We are conditioned to presume that church is about us. Church is where we come to be reminded of our responsibilities, a place where we come to note where we have gone wrong and to get on the right path.

No church is primarily about God. Church is where we come to learn the truth about who God is and what God is up to in the world.ⁱ

It's not that we don't read a text and ask ourselves what is this saying to me or what is this saying to Christ's church but rather that we always look first at what does this say about God. What does this text reveal about who God is? Who Jesus is? Who the Holy Spirit is? What does this text say about what God is doing in the world, through God's people, and through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ? We fall into the trap all the time, myself included, of highlighting what we are doing here at Bethany. Even today, on this God's work. Our hands. Sunday it is all too easy to make it about us. Wow! Look at us but it is first and foremost God's work and how God is at work in and through the church. Or the baptism of Julian shortly – it's about God. God is the primary actor in baptism. It's God's word that makes a baptism a baptism. It is God calling out, searching, and welcoming another child of God created in God's image into Christ's church. It is about how God will come to Julian through his parents and family. It is about how God will come to him through this community of faith. It is how God will nurture his faith and then how God will use him in the world to bear forth that love and light of Jesus Christ.

Every Sunday, every baptism, every celebration of the Lord's supper, every prayer we lift up, every sermon that is preached, every dollar that we give, every car we will wash today, every knot we might tie quilting, or every note that is played and every word that is sung during worship and later on at Crestview (Nursing and Rehabilitation Center) is about God. God is at work!

In all things the Holy Spirit calls and equips the church to see God, to proclaim what God is doing, and to reveal that to a world who often struggles to see God in the midst of suffering, evil, and sin. And that doesn't mean God is the initiator of all things. On this day when we remember so many lives that were lost, affected by, and forever changed by a cowardly act of terrorism the church is not called to proclaim that was part of God's plan. That is not what God was doing. That is not who God is. God was there but God wasn't the one directing such outward signs of evil, hatred, and anger. God was rather found right alongside those who lost their lives and were injured. God was found right alongside those who stood in awe and wept. God was right alongside those who came to the aid and put their own lives on the line and even died doing so. God was in the prayers that were lifted up. God is there today continuing to give strength to all those for whom this day is so difficult. God is at work continuing to thwart evil and usher in the kingdom of God. Amen.

¹ Will Willimon, *Will Willimon's Pulpit Resource Vol. 44, No. 3* (Abingdon Press, 2016) p.34.