

1 Timothy 1:12-17 ~ Luke 15:1-10

God Still Searches

14th Sunday after Pentecost ~ September 11, 2022

Rally Sunday ~ Bible Presentation ~ Sunday School Teacher Dedication

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture Lesson

"Never complain, never explain." As the United Kingdom and the world mourn the recent passing of Queen Elizabeth II at the age of 96, after her stunning 70-year reign, memories of all things British loom large in our hearts and minds. I first heard the saying "never complain, never explain" while watching an episode of "Downton Abbey" when the Dowager Countess, magnificently played by Maggie Smith, offered this advice while at table with her daughter and granddaughters. I have learned since, that this adage is originally attributed to the 19th century British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli who served two terms under Queen Victoria (Queen Elizabeth's great great grandmother) and was adopted as a favorite saying by the late Queen Elizabeth's mom, "the Queen Mother."

In today's gospel lesson, it was the complaining of the Pharisees that inspired Jesus to offer his explanation. They don't even call him "Teacher" or "Rabbi," but rather the dismissive, "this fellow." They just can't get their heads around his habit of hanging out with so called "sinners." Not just teaching them, or healing them, but actually sitting down and *eating* with them. Yup: we finally got through Luke 14, but here in Luke 15, we still can't seem to leave the Table. This Table of Grace continues to uncork question upon question. So, Jesus explains his behavior to all of them, by telling stories. Three stories in a row about being lost and being found. Especially in these first two parables, the ones we will hear today, the primary actors are the Shepherd and then the woman. Two people to help us see the immortal, invisible, and I would add, unexplainable, grace of God.

But first, I want to invite all of you to participate in the reading of our gospel lesson. You have one word to learn and repeat when I cue you. We can have a little fun with this. It's the Greek word that is translated as "grumbling." It occurs only twice in the entire New Testament, both times in Luke's gospel. It's a great word because it is "onomata-poetic," which is a fancy way of saying that the word sounds like what it means. The Greek word is: *Diegongyzon*. Try saying it with me: *Diegongyzon*. It is a word that means "many indignantly complaining" or "a constant buzz of negative murmuring". I need all of you to pull this off. Let's try saying 3-4 times in a row, in our best grumbling tone. Turning to the persons on either side of you. *Diegongyzon*... You can throw in a scowling face expression too, if you like.

Sermon

Those Britts may aspire to "Never complain, never explain." But here in the US, we did not get the memo. In fact, you might say that grumbling is a national pastime. Perhaps a nearly universal one. We complain about the weather, even about our favorite football team. We grumble about "young people these days," and, oh yes, we grumble about political leadership. Unless the leader is "our person," then we grumble about the opposition. In the

church and beyond, liberals grumble about conservatives, conservatives grumble about liberals, and moderates grumble about both. When in doubt, we grumble. Perhaps grumbling is the thing that unites us. We can all find many things to gripe about. Yet, here in the bright light of God's search light, that we can see that grumbling is actually a reminder of our sin and our brokenness. Let's try to remember this the next time we feel a grumble coming on.

From whatever door we enter the room of this parable today, whether as a righteous churchy grumbler or a fringy unwashed sinner: there is great news in this story for *all* of us. I can say that with confidence, because these stories are about the unexplainable, inscrutable grace of God for every one of us. No matter how utterly lost or how overly found we may feel. Did you notice? In these two parables Jesus does not tell us how or why the sheep got lost or the coin was misplaced. Not important. It's more about the Shepherd and the Woman and their response to what they have lost. Having 100 sheep or 10 Drachmas indicates they were both well off. From a dollars and sense point of view, losing one 10th of what they had would not have hurt them financially. Why the relentless search and then the big party for something so relatively minor to them? You or I probably wouldn't look that hard, or party that extravagantly.

But they are not like us. They are more like God who relentlessly searches for the lost. And then puts on an over-the-top celebration for finding just one sheep, or coin. Luke 15 has been called the heart of Luke's Gospel because finding what was lost is Jesus' jam. That's what he came to this earth to do, essentially. Therefore, as Captain America would put it, "I can do this all day." This welcoming, finding, eating with others who could never reciprocate, who could not serve in any way to elevate his status or power: Jesus can search and rescue, restore and heal all day, and all night, for eternity.

God counts us as one of God's beloved sheep or coins. No matter what we have done or has been done to us. No matter how lost or found we may feel. That is the truth we claim when we baptize babies who have no idea what we are doing or why. When I take my thumb, still wet from just baptizing a baby, make the sign of the cross on the baby's forehead and say, "Child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever," we are claiming this truth for that child. I am voicing for all of us the heart of Jesus' truth meant for the ears of the Pharisees and scribes, and for all the tax collectors and sinners who had come near to listen. "Because you are. Because you exist: You are mine. You are not alone. You belong to me."

There's no grumbling in grace. Nor is there explaining. It is pure gift. When we are found, God's joy is instant, unbounded, and extravagant. Celebrations cost money (we all know this). The cost of those parties for the found sheep and the found coin likely cost most than they actually gained the found property. But that is not the point Jesus was making. Rather, I think he wants us to picture the shepherd, the woman, and yes, the father craning his neck on the horizon and seeing at last the silhouette for which has been longing. His boy is coming home. He has been found.

But before this joy, there is grief. I see it between the lines of these parables: the grief-stricken shepherd, the lamenting woman, and the bereft father in the story of the Prodigal Son. We can hear their cry in the search for the lost. The Giver of Grace has wept and continues to weep. The weeping and wailing can be heard in the stories of our ancestors of Jacob grieving over Joseph, and Rachel weeping for her children, as Jeremiah writes, "Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more (Jeremiah 31:15). The story of Rachel's grief continues and is retrieved by Matthew in response Herod's massacre of new children in order to stop the threat of baby Jesus. (Matthew 2:16-18).ⁱ

As long as there are lost children, there is grief. Here on earth and in heaven. Friends, we know that we are not finished with weeping over lost children, of any age and every land. I hear Jesus' calling us to us to refuse to be comforted, while others are suffering. Jesus is telling us, Jesus is showing us that God, searches for every person that is lost. Some are hiding in plain sight. The tragic story of Neena Pacholke's death at age 27 is cause for weeping. The Wausau television news anchor took her own life on August 27. Days after Neena's death, her sister Kaitlynn Pacholke spoke to *the Tampa Bay Times*, saying "My sister was by far the happiest person I thought I knew. Sometimes you just don't know what people are going through, no matter how much you think you know someone. My sister had access to every resource you could imagine. She was loved by everybody. She was so good at her job." And yet, Neena came to the point where she could not continue her life. And so, unexplainably, she ended it.ⁱⁱ

And Jesus wept. Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among people aged 10-14, the 3rd leading cause of death among people aged 15-24. Grief over loss is an experience we all share that goes deeper than the grumbling. Way deeper. Twenty-one years ago this very morning, on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, the U.S. came under attack when four commercial airliners were hijacked and used to strike targets on the ground. Nearly 3,000 people tragically lost their lives. And Jesus wept. In 2020, the number of people who died in the U.S. by gun violence was 15 times that of those souls who died on 9/11. We, with Jesus, weep for the lost children in Uvalde, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, Sandy Hook, and Columbine, and too many more.

Yes, we are still lost. But God still searches for us. It does not matter how or why we got lost; all that matters is that we think again of God and that we are found."ⁱⁱⁱ I hear Jesus calling us to chose grace. When in doubt, don't grumble. Instead, when in doubt, choose grace. Let's face it: we are often in doubt, skeptical, and/or grumbly. Jesus calls us to let go of the grumbling and choose grace. Whether you are doubting yourself, someone you know and love, or someone you loathe (known or unknown). Or maybe it's a group of people that make you so mad you want to grumble, gripe, and grind your teeth. Jesus calls us to choose otherwise. My friends, because the ground at the foot of the cross is level: when in doubt, choose grace: All day, every day. Starting today.

https://churchanew.org/brueggemann/notcomforted?mc_cid=ea8265bc15&mc_eid=4232ed5e8f

ⁱⁱ <https://people.com/human-interest/wisconsin-news-anchor-neena-pacholkes-cause-of-death-confirmed-by-police/>

ⁱⁱⁱ T. Denise Anderson, "Living the Word", Sojo.net Sept/Oct 2022, p.49. This article also gave me the idea for my sermon title.