



ST. PAUL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
DELRAY BEACH, FLORIDA

16 Pentecost – Proper 19 - Year C
September 15/16, 2007

Exodus 32:1, 7-15; Ps. 51:1-18; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10
Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, Rector

The ridiculous love of God!

Not that long ago, Susan Stokes was frantically looking for her black sweater...Not one of her black sweaters mind you, *the* black sweater...the black sweater she took everywhere... The day began innocently enough. "Have you seen my black sweater?"

"No," I answered. I was sitting at the kitchen table, working on my laptop and not understanding the true magnitude of the question.

"I can't find it anywhere....Maybe it's in the car."

We had been in Jacksonville the previous day, visiting Kerry, our daughter and her husband Kevin and Emily our granddaughter... Susan went out the front door to look in the car. She came back in a few moments later empty handed.

"Maybe you left it in Jacksonville?" I suggested. I was a little slow. Susan was already on the phone to Kerry....

"Did I leave my black sweater there?" She said into the phone.....Silence....

"I don't know what I did with it. I can't find it anywhere....I'll talk to you later."

"Kerry said it's not there," she turned and said to me.

I got up and began to look around the house with her. I decided to go and look in the car, including in the trunk, just in case she missed it....The seriousness of this problem was beginning to dawn on me....It shouldn't have taken me so long....When I misplace something - watch out, I will turn the whole house upside down until I find it, often leaving a disaster in my wake....

I went back into the house and into our bedroom. Susan was busy going through the overnight bags we had taken to Jacksonville. Not there. She rummaged through the clothes hamper. Not there...

"I can't think of where I left it," she said as we drove down to St. Paul's, "I had it yesterday...I remember."

When we arrived at St. Paul's, I went into her office with her and we both looked around, just in case....No black sweater....

"It'll turn up," I said. She was not comforted....

I went into my own office leaving Susan standing there, agonizing over what she might have done with her black sweater....I forgot about it, sort of. The morning passed at St. Paul's, and as the morning passed, Susan's black sweater faded from my mind....I had a lunch appointment and then did a couple of pastoral calls in the afternoon....I returned to St. Paul's at about three and went back to my computer and continued working...At about 3:30, Susan burst into my office...

"Erin had it!"

"Had what?"

"My black sweater! She borrowed it when we were at Kerry's!"

Erin, our oldest daughter had been in Jacksonville, too.

The smile and look of relief on Susan's face was radiant, she even did a little dance...Joy had returned to her soul.....And then, well, what happened after that really is a story....

She got on the phone and began inviting everyone to the house.....

"I've found my black sweater. Come celebrate!"

She went to Costco's and bought a beef tenderloin....

"I found my black sweater!" she told the woman at the checkout and the man who checks receipts at the door.....

As people began arriving at the house, she served them foie gras....

"Do you believe it? I found my black sweater," she said to everyone over and over again....

She pulled out a bottle of Dom Perignon that had been given to us as a gift.... We had been holding on to it for a special occasion - for a very special occasion.... As the last champagne flute was filled, she raised her glass and said to all those gathered, "Rejoice with me, my black sweater which was lost has been found!" and everybody said "Here, here!" and raised their glasses in celebration of the black sweater and cheered with Susan that it had been found....

Isn't that good?

Now, let me tell you, it was true, every bit of it....that is, until I got to the part where Susan began inviting everybody to our home to celebrate...

To be sure, Susan was happy.... She told everyone she spoke with on the phone for the rest of that day, that she had found her black sweater... She had to - they all knew it was missing.

But when I told you that she invited everybody to the house, that she bought a beef tenderloin; when I told you that she fed them foie gras and took out the bottle of Dom Perignon and filled all the glasses and toasted in celebration of her black sweater which had been found; well, I made all that up.... The bottle of Dom Perignon is still in the refrigerator waiting for that special occasion - that very special occasion...

Everything I told you about what Susan did to celebrate finding that black sweater was made up... It was ridiculous. It was absurd. It was over the top!

And God.... God is like that, Jesus is saying in today's Gospel.

God is just like that, when someone who was lost is found.... God is like that when one sinner turns and repents and is saved..... God's joy is ridiculous... God's joy is absurd... God's joy is over the top!

Jesus was speaking to an audience of Scribes and Pharisees, the religious establishment of their day.... They were the holy ones.... But like so many of the holy ones, they often fell into the trap of self-righteousness and "holier-than-thou-ism." And in their self-righteousness and "holier-than-thou-ism," they would look at other persons who were, well, "not like us," and they would label those persons and exclude them from the community and its fellowship.... They would not associate with them.... They would not worship with them.... They would not dine with them.

But you see, Jesus had a radical idea.... Jesus believed that God loved everyone. He didn't believe that God loved everything everyone did, but he believed that God loved everyone... Jesus was uncompromising in this belief.... And Jesus was always ready to ask better and deeper questions about people and about the circumstances which contributed to some people finding themselves in the gutter, or becoming prostitutes, or living lives of sin or just being lost....

Moreover, Jesus was always ready to meet a person, any person where they were....No matter how low they had sunk, no matter how despicable they had become, no matter how much they were rejected by others, Jesus would sit with them, eat with them, talk with them and love them with God's love....

The Scribes and the Pharisees and others of the self-righteous had a two-fold problem. First, they had a higher view of themselves than they ought to have had....Their inclination to see the sinfulness of others distracted them from taking a hard look at themselves and their own sinfulness, both as individuals and communally....This led to hypocrisy in their personal lives and injustice in their communal life...

Second, their routine exclusion of tax collectors and sinners and other "undesirables" contributed to a vicious cycle that segmented society. It assured that some people would be perpetually relegated to one station and condition of life, while another class of persons would be able to take advantages of the privileges of society, often exploiting the lower and weaker classes in the process....

Jesus rejected all of this, both in what he said and in what he did as today's Gospel reading makes clear...Tax collectors and sinners and other undesirables were coming to listen to him and to eat with him and, as Luke writes, "the Pharisees and the Scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"

Jesus hears this and challenges them with two parables: The first about a shepherd with one hundred sheep, who loses one of them and leaves the 99 in his possession to go after the one who had wandered away....He finds it and comes back rejoicing and throws a party for his friends....

The second parable is about a woman who has ten silver coins and loses one...Like Susan Stokes and many others of us, she nearly goes crazy looking for it... When she finds it, she rejoices with incomparable joy....

"God is like that!" Jesus says to the self-righteous Scribes and Pharisees....God is like that foolish shepherd....God is like that silly womanGod's joy is ridiculous....God's joy is absurd....God's joy is over the top....And do you know what? It's true.

For years, I was in the restaurant business...Susan and I had married and started having children when we were young....I was in college and studying, but I also had to put food on the table....Our parents were wonderful and supportive and helpful, but they rightly expected us to take responsibility for ourselves and our decisions....I began working in restaurants, working at night tending bar and going to school during the day...

I became enamored of the restaurant business, especially after I began working in a very hot spot on New York's Upper East Side....I was around celebrities and partying all the time and making, what to me, was a lot of money. "What am I going to do with a degree in English and World Literature?" I thought to myself....I dropped out of college in the middle of my Junior year and began to pursue a career in restaurants....

All through this, we were raising a family....We had two girls, Erin and Kerry in short order....We waited five years and then had Johnny, who was born in Houston...As my career in restaurants was growing, so was my family and my responsibilities to them....

In 1983, I was asked to open a large restaurant in Baltimore at Harborplace....It was a huge project that included construction...For a while, I was commuting between New York and Baltimore, spending four days in Baltimore and then returning to New York to work with the owners and to have some family time. It was brutal....

Shortly after the restaurant opened, we rented a townhouse in the lovely Bolton Hill area of Baltimore...Around the corner from this townhouse was a beautiful Episcopal Church, called Memorial Church...

I had grown up in a very active Episcopal Church family and I had always been very faithful in my participation and attendance throughout my childhood and teen years... I can say in all honesty, that there was never a time when I did not think of myself as a Christian or a member of the Church...

Still, when I was in college and tending bar and waiting tables, when I began to run restaurants, and was working ludicrous hours – often from nine or ten in morning until two in the morning, six and seven days a week, and always on weekends – I didn't get to church much beyond Christmas and on Easter.....

When we did go, I was aware that it was not just important to me, but that it was a part of me...It was a part of me because Christ was a part of me....Even with this knowledge and awareness, however, during my years in the restaurant business we rarely made it to church, that is, until we moved to Bolton Hill....

Erin was seven, Kerry was six and Johnny was two and, like so many parents with young children, I felt we needed to get to church for our children's sake...So, soon after we moved to Bolton Hill, I made it clear to the staff at the restaurant I was running that they would have to open for brunch without me. We were going to church.....

It felt a little strange and awkward...Being new to a church often feels awkward....Walking into a church with three children who haven't really had this as a part of their regular experience is awkward, but the people at Memorial Church were warm and welcoming....And I want you to know something, something important.....

While I thought what I was doing was for my children, and it was, it also turned out that being in that church that Sunday morning was just as important for me....I had an overwhelming sense that I had come home...It marked the beginning of the end of my career in the restaurant business....

It took two more years and some deep soul searching, but the turning point was that Sunday morning at Memorial Church in Bolton Hill...By 1985 I was a postulant for Holy Orders in the Diocese of Long Island. I re-enrolled at Manhattan College to finish up my English and World Literature degree and began working my way toward seminary....

When I went to Memorial Church that Sunday morning, I didn't know it, but I had been lost...But that Sunday morning, Christ found me....I was enfolded in God's embrace and enveloped by a joy that was ridiculous and absurd and over the top....

Perhaps you have a similar story to tell and maybe you are here at St. Paul's today because of it....If so, I give thanks to God for that....Perhaps you are here today and God's embrace is just starting to wrap around you....I hope you will give in to it....

You see, it wasn't about the priesthood really....Heaven knows we need Christian restaurateurs today.....We need Christian lawyers and doctors and teachers and plumbers and carpenters....All of us are called...

Years ago, a woman named Anne Rowthorn wrote a wonderful book called *The Liberation of the Laity*. In that book she referred to the laity as the "Prime Ministers of the Church." And she was right. If the Gospel makes a difference, it is because faithful lay people take it into the workaday world.

All of us, lay and ordained, are called into Christ and Christ's ministry and through Christ and his ministry, into the heart and love of God...That's what this baptism is about...Oscar and Sasha will have to grow into their callings....Their parents and godparents will have to shape them in their ministries, but they are called....

We need to recognize something else.....As vital as our fellowship with one another is, and it is vital, St. Paul's is not intended to be a club in which the 99 righteous sheep hang out by themselves....Our calling, the calling we all share, compels us, to go out and seek the lost and to bring them in...And the lost are many!

This society and culture in which we live and move and have our being is relentless in trying to lead people astray... Everyone of you knows someone who is lost...You know people struggling with life's issues: addictions, marital troubles, financial problems, career crises, family issues....You know friends and neighbors who are lost....You know people at work who are lost....You know young people who are lost....You know seniors who are lost too....You know sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles and cousins who are lost....How can we not reach out in love to these lost and hurting people? How can we not invite them to discover the love of God in Jesus Christ through this church? How can we not lead them to discover this place as home, true home?

Christ calls us to be like the foolish shepherd, leaving the ninety-nine safe sheep to go find the one that is lost...Christ calls us to be like that silly woman who searches and searches for that lost coin until she finds it....God calls us to be like Susan Stokes looking for her black sweater, stubbornly and persistently and single-mindedly....

And, Oh, what rejoicing there is heaven when it happens...Every time some lost soul is found....What a divine celebration there is when sinners repent, even just one....You wouldn't believe it, if I told you....It's just ridiculous...It's absolutely absurd....It's completely over the top!