PENTECOST XVI

Rejoice with me. Rejoice with me. Luke 15:9

The tax collectors and sinners were coming near. Danger! Danger!

The crowds are pressing in on Jesus. They want to hear what he has to tell them. All manner of folk want to hear him, and they have a variety of motives and desires.

The disciples want to learn. With little to no information they have signed on to a mission. They want to know what, and why, and how they are to carry it out. The Pharisees and scribes, the religious police, want to keep tabs on what this radical upstart is teaching. They are out to deck him when and if they can.

And then there are the rest, *the tax collectors and the sinners*, the folk who don't really belong anywhere, the ones who have lived life on the fringes. They are the losers, the ones no one really wants around, because at least they will lower the tone of the crowd, at worst, the respectable folk will become guilty by association.

Somehow these outsiders have crowded in. Not anybody's idea of a congenial guest list for dinner. Yet here they all are, in the company of Jesus. And since we tend to be known by the company we keep, Jesus has thrown the community into disarray.

The tax collectors and sinners were coming near. And the community begins to panic. The Pharisees and scribes begin to grumble, and the disciples, never the most courageous bunch, doubtless worry about the legitimacy–perceived or real–of their enterprise. Why does Jesus keep busting out of bounds? Why does he keep imperiling his credibility by socializing with pariahs and no-hopers?

Jesus gets it. He sees the tension in the gathering. And so he begins to talk about God. He talks in terms everyone can understand, everyday terms, economic terms. He talks about what people in this community value: sheep, by whom many make their living and count on their survival, and money itself.

Jesus wants them to think of a nightmare common to all of us: what if we lose the most precious thing in our lives, the thing on which our livelihood, if not our life itself, depends on? How do we feel? Devastated? Frightened? Disoriented? Careless for having lost it? Ripped off?

And what do we do? We search. Patiently or recklessly, resolutely or desperately. We look everywhere. We are distracted from other activity, preoccupied with loss, anxious. We are focused on finding what has been lost or has gone astray.

So, Jesus says, God is like the shepherd who goes after the valued missing sheep. God is like the woman who keeps track of each coin in her purse. When we go lost or missing, God comes after us. Tirelessly, patiently, carefully, lovingly, God searches us out in our lostness, our hiddenness, and brings us home.

And God has a long and loving reach. God goes into the dark, forgotten corners of the world to find those who need finding. And God goes into the secret, shameful, sorrowful corners of our souls to bring us out into the light of God's love and mercy.

Now God and Jesus have a partnership going. God, Jesus says, goes out to scour the landscape for the least, the lost, and the left behind. Jesus, on the other hand, generally lets folk come to him. He travels around the countryside, to be sure, but once he lights in a village or town, the crowds come to him. They press in upon him. *They* find *him*.

Complementary modes of operation. Designed to draw in a marvelous diversity of folks. Some of us, after all, need to be found. We aren't convinced that we are worthy, or may not know what we need. Others of us need to do the seeking, need to feel that we have done the finding. God and Jesus accommodate both sets of needs, both kinds of searches.

I have a very special ring, a lucky ring. It was given me by my dear friend Carolyn as an ordination gift, 25 years ago. It's a sculpted silver design with a bird (the Holy Spirit) a scallop shell (baptism) and a couple of small green stones. A modern ring, and one I would never have bought for myself.

I wore it occasionally, but when Carolyn's husband Joe, and then my dad, got sick with cancer, I began to wear it all the time. It seemed like a talisman. But I wore it on my little finger then, and it was hard to write in longhand when I had it on.

One summer – nine years ago it was– I spent a week by myself at my parents' house in Maine. I was working on a writing project and I went to a family beach every day to read and write. The first day there I took my ring off and set in on a beach sandal.

Eventually the sky got cloudy and I went home. But when I got there I realized I didn't have my ring. I panicked! I went back, enlisting my daughter to help, and we searched the small beach. I knew exactly where I'd been sitting, where my sandals had been, but the ring wasn't there. It wasn't anywhere.

I felt terrible. I felt stupid and careless, sad and devastated. And I felt superstitious. Did this mean Dad would die soon? Or Joe?

Every day for a week I went back to the beach, and every day I searched for that ring. I really didn't have hope, I figured that the tide had come in and washed it away. And the loss of the ring cast a deep shadow over my mood all week.

But on the very last day I took a mussel shell and scraped in the sand where I had been sitting when I lost the ring. And there, under a half-inch or so of sand, was the ring!

I couldn't believe it. I was visited by the most overwhelming sense of relief, and gratitude, and joy. I felt like part of a miracle. And I was very aware of feeling, not simply that I had found what was lost, but that I myself had been found in some way. And I had no doubt that God was in the mix.

Within several days of my finding that ring, the intervention occurred that resulted in my going into treatment for alcohol addiction. The folks who did that intervention found me at my most vulnerable, my most shamed, my most desperate. But in the moment of being found like that, I began to find myself. I found, at once, in the moment of the intervention, that there was something more vital to me than alcohol. And that was my priesthood, my vocation, my call to serve God.

And my life since then has been a deeper and deeper process of discovery, and of being discovered, of finding and of being found, by God. I always connect the losing and finding of my ring with being found and finding myself.

Jesus talks about sheep and shepherds, coins and housewives. In his parables, the sheep and coins stand for lost "sinners" and the shepherds and housewives represent God, or God's activity. But we are not sheep or coins, who wait passively to be found. However lost we may be, some part of us joins in the search for ourselves, or at the very least, responds to the searcher.

This process of finding and being found is a mutual one. It involves Jesus and us, God and us. It involves the community and us. I doubt that coins have a sense of community, but sheep have a sense of the flock, and a lost sheep surely feels a sense of comfort, of rightness, when she is returned to her companions. And surely the flock feels more complete at her return.

Just so, the community of faith. We rejoice when someone finds us, or returns to us. We rejoice when we find someone to whom we can offer the blessings of our community. We feel more complete, more whole. We rejoice.

And just so, God.

Amen