

# God's Persistent Love

September 16, In the Year of Our LORD, 2007

Gates Presbyterian Church

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

I do “frantic and desperate” well. Last Sunday, after the Time With Our Younger Disciples, I returned to my pew and sat down between my wife, Sally and Elder Carol Howell who was waiting to assist in serving Holy Communion. As I sat down, I realized something was amiss. I no longer had a worship bulletin. I had no worship notes and ... I had no sermon. I looked under the pew. I looked in my hymnal. I sat forward and looked back at where I was sitting. I looked under the pew again. I looked in the pew rack behind me. I looked at Sally. Then, during the next hymn, by now in full panic, frantic and desperate mode, I looked at Carol Howell to my right, saw her worship bulletin poking out of her hymnal and without even asking put my finger in it to see if somehow it was my bulletin.

I had an audience and it wasn't just Sally and a bewildered Carol. Two pews behind me, Nancy Morris was having a wonderful time watching my antics, Carol's face, my persistent and obviously unsuccessful attempt to find what I *had* to find. It was one of those occasions when the final version of the sermon was completely different from the first draft in every way, shape and form and for me to recite the final version was not possible.

When I stopped, collected myself and thought about it, I realized my notes were on the Bible at the lectern. I calmly walked up during the last stanza of the hymn, nabbed them and returned to my pew. As my “luck” would have it, Nancy was subbing for Carol Balsley as custodian last week and so every day, Nancy would see me and laugh. She claims it was not at my plight as she felt badly for me. It was my antics and Carol Howell's face which for some odd reason, Nancy found tremendously entertaining. [looking at Nancy] Glad to be of service!

Knowing today's Gospel Lesson was about a lost sheep and a lost coin, I found it somewhat comforting that as frantic and desperate as I was to find my sermon, as persistent and determined as I was to locate my paperwork, ... I find it comforting that God is *just* as persistent and determined, perhaps even frantic and desperate to find each and every lost soul and return it to the company of believers.

From lost to found. From hopeless to hope-filled. From sinful ways to forgiveness in grace and mercy. From forlorn to imbued joy. All wonderful affirmation of how each and every one of us might embrace God's persistent love that no matter what pursues us, grabs us, and invites us to come with contrite hearts to once again be God's faithful servants.

But there is a profound problem with all of this. As hopeless as some people find themselves, as willing as some are to admit their sins – how they fall short of the ways of God – and as much as many people have moments when they feel forlorn, confused, lonely, fearful, purposeless or helpless, I suspect all too many people don't realize that they are in essence, lost!

Saul, the Jewish leader, whose task it was to hunt down and persecute Christians, who stood by and gave consent to Stephen's martyrdom, didn't have the foggiest idea that he was "lost" to the ways of grace and hope and peace – the true ways of God. We know the story of his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus when he turned his life around and, taking his Greek name, Paul, became instead the greatest champion of the Way, Christianity. In our morning reading from 1 Timothy, we hear how he articulates his journey from "lost to found:"

I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted Him; but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our LORD overflowed with the faith and love that are in Jesus Christ.

How similarly did John Newton, a Captain on a slave trading ship realize the grace of God and become a great defender of the faith, and in the end, even the most profound opponent to the slave trade. Mirroring the words of 1 Timothy, we know Mr. Newton's journey from "lost to found" every time we sing his hymn, as we will at the conclusion of my message –

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.

The Apostle Paul and John Newton came to terms with how they were "lost." So, what about us? Clearly, from Paul and John Newton's example, we realize that by "lost" we don't mean that a person is literally out in the woods somewhere and has lost their way home, but that isn't a bad allegory – for perhaps we have lost our way home to God and the ways of the Creating, Redeeming and Empowering One whom Paul called as echoed in our first hymn: "Immortal, Invisible, the Only God."

In parallel to the words we have shared in our Opening Prayer and Prayers of Confession, listen to the wisdom in these two quotes. A Laurence Peter wrote:

If you don't know where you are going, you will probably end up somewhere else.  
Laurence J. Peter (1919 - 1988)

And Lewis Carroll, author of "Alice in Wonderland," adds:

If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there.  
Lewis Carroll (1832 - 1898)

As ever, members of our Wednesday evening Bible Class contributed much to my preparation for today. When I asked them to name how we are lost – however they wanted to define "we," they spoke of how peoples' lives are fragmented, of people enslaved to drugs, alcohol and so much more, and how our government, at all levels, seems to be floundering. They spoke of how so many of our lives are no longer centered on God and how, in the self-centeredness of our lives, we should not be surprised that people have lost hope, lost faith, lost the ways of God. Last week, we introduced Don Mullen, our church's Commissioned Lay Pastor Student Intern for the next five months. During Wednesday's class, he spoke of a sermon he preached recently based on reading from the Book of Jeremiah. Mr. Mullen's thesis was to echo Jeremiah's admonitions to the people of Jerusalem by asking: "To whom are we listening?" Our hope is that we are listening to the voice of God, but just as the people of Jeremiah's time were ignoring God, we suspect people are doing so today.

Are we listening to the voice of the Almighty? What will it take to remind us to turn to God for the ways of grace and the ways of peace in our lives and the lives of others? What will it take for us to listen to Christ and Christ's ways for answers about life's difficulties and struggles? What will it take for us to recognize that in all our grasping and searching for peace of mind, peace of soul and peace of heart that we need but return to the presence of the Holy Spirit for the answers we seek?

Do we even know that in depending and leaning on so much else in life, on wealth, success and influence, that we have lost our way? And do we realize that with vim and vigor, determination and persistence, grace and love, God is looking for us – looking, almost frantically, as did the pastor who lost his sermon, the shepherd who lost a sheep, the woman who lost a coin – or, as we could read in the rest of that fifteenth chapter of Luke, the father who gazed beyond the horizon continually for the return of the lost, the one we call the prodigal, son?

Are we lost to God because we seek that which we consider to be the necessities of life – some of which are far beyond what we truly need? Are we lost to God because our focus is on which sports team is doing what, which so-called “superstar” is in the news, who is besting whom in a political debate, or how we can succeed as the world so often defines success?

Mission trips like the one from which some of us just returned are humbling if for no other reason that we recognize how fortunate we are in all that we take for granted. It is eye-opening to receive smiles and hear laughter from people who live on less than one U.S. dollar each day! The day after we returned from Guatemala, I was walking on the concrete floor of our home's garage and thought of how *every* home in Panacal is dirt. Earlier this week, when our home's hot water heater failed and there was water on our basement floor and the carpet had to be hauled outside to dry, I thought of how homes in Panacal don't have running water, much less *hot* water, even less, carpets to get soaked. When I worried this morning about whether our sanctuary would be cool because of last night's lower temperature, what with our heating service found to be at the end of its life and red-tagged – which means we will have no heat until the furnaces are replaced in the next week or so – I thought of the wood fires on which the peoples of Panacal depend when the evenings are cool. All of that is to reiterate that in our daily complacencies – in our daily routines in which we simply *expect* the provision of our lives – that we are in some ways lost – not only to how the vast majority of the people on this globe live each day in true want – but to a sense of how grateful we would be to the Almighty God for so very much!

That said, do we recognize in the comparative luxuries of our lives, that there is a temptation to forget our need for God? That only makes God pursue us all the more! I know some people don't like the hymn “Amazing Grace” because they don't consider themselves to be “lost” and certainly not “wretched.” If you don't want to sing those words, so be it – but as we remain seated and sing those well known stanzas, recognize, at a minimum, how God, the God Who challenged Saul on the road to Damascus, Who changed the life of John Newton who wrote the words of our hymn – how that same God is frantic and persistent, determined to find us, embrace us, cajole us, and in so many wonderful ways, give us the ultimate gift of unending and gracious love.

Amen.