God's Relentless Compassion

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 19C || September 14, 2025 || 9:30am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10 || The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

It is a good morning to be together, and we are blessed with some great scripture passages that offer us – the confession of a committed sinner, the testimony of St. Paul and then a double portion of parables, though Luke's gospel mashes two into one. We are even offered one of the parables where Jesus talks about God as a woman (the woman who looks everywhere until she finds the lost silver coin)

So at the bookend of a full, and challenging week, we are forgiven if, as those readings were read, we missed some of the encouraging and comforting messages. Last week we talked about God seeking us out and knowing us, not standing by and waiting for us to arrive, but actively seeking us. This week, as though we need a refresher and reassurance, we are offered multiple examples of what God's seeking looks like. It is relentless. God pursues us with relentless determination and unwavering compassion.

In his letter to Timothy, Paul generously confesses to his own history as a committed blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. By any measure, Paul would not have been an attractive traveler on the way. His point to Timothy is that his life choices would have disqualified him from ministry, if humans were the boss of that. And yet, he shares, "I received mercy," "the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."

This is the confounding gift of God. God pursued Paul, offered him a pretty extraordinary and attention-getting conversion experience and Paul became one of the most widely traveled,

quoted and relied upon witnesses in history. I love that Paul is so forthcoming about his failures, about his lousy life's choices, and about God's unearned grace.

In case we can't relate to that commitment and relentless compassion, we have the gospel of Luke with Jesus surrounded by all sorts of people. Most notably, scribes and Pharisees who are grumbling and criticizing Jesus for the company he keeps. And this morning, rather than challenging his critics with a toe to toe debate on doctrine, Jesus offers a couple of head scratching, if not powerful parables, each of which he introduces with curiosity.

"Which one of you," he asks, "having a hundred sheep and losing one, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" If there were shepherds in the crowd, I imagine the response would have been a resounding – "None of US! Why would we risk the health and safety of 99 to go look for the silly one that wandered off?" (Today, we might agree – absolutely we ***would not***, because, we have no sheep, and this makes no sense). Here is the God lesson – God in his relentless compassion can not let even one of us go. God is pursuing us constantly.

Or – the second story is about a woman whose loss of a coin sends her on a cleaning spree. This one we can perhaps imagine. If we lost a coin in the car, the laundry or somewhere in our homes, we might look hard for it, or we might not. Whether we looked diligently or not, I'm fairly certain once we found the coin we wouldn't send out party invitations to celebrate. But that is what God does. God looks for us relentlessly, and celebrates when we are found or we repent and return, when we are reunited with God and God's loving embrace. There is celebration and joy!

I love this story of God as a housekeeping woman, and am always pleased to have an image as God as our Shepherd. We are blessed with this familiar imagery in this beautiful sanctuary in our main window. When you look at that, or in your reflective prayers, I'd like to offer you another important element of these parables. Neither the missing coin nor the missing sheep did ANYTHING to be found. The sheep didn't wander back into the fold and the coin did not hop back into the woman's waiting hand or light pocket.

The woman and the shepherd are seeking, and they don't stop until the sheep and the coin is found. This is relentless compassion. Compassion that seeks, compassion that refuses to give up, compassion that culminates not in scolding but in rejoicing.

Relentless compassion does not deny the harm we do. God's compassion for Paul did not erase his harmful, violent, sin-filled past. But it also didn't abandon Paul or allow his crummy

life choices to be the last word that defined him. God continually, compassionately pursued Paul when he was lost. Just as God pursues us.

God's relentless compassion pursues each of us when we are lost—lost in greed, lost in despair, lost in crushing grief or lost in sinful or distracting habits, addictions or self-condemnation. God's compassion claims the truth about these behaviors even as it is running after us, sweeping the house and lighting lamps until we are found.

This morning we are reminded and perhaps confounded by the fact that God does not stop searching for us. God does not write us off. God's compassion is relentless—it will not let us go.

If you know what it feels like to be lost, disconnected or feeling as though you don't belong, the news is even better. The great news of this morning is that God's compassion is stronger than your wandering. God's compassion is relentless—it will find you.

For those of us pretty comfortable and confident in God's loving presence, we are called to action. Jesus tells his listeners and us these stories as invitations to embody the same relentless compassion as God offers. We are not God, so we may not be perfect in these pursuits, but we are called to work hard on God' behalf.

When we see someone who has wandered, someone on the margins, someone the world has written off, relentless compassion says: we must not give up on them. When the easy choice is to protect the ninety-nine, relentless compassion says: seek the one. When others grumble about "those people," relentless compassion says: "yikes, I better sit down and eat with them."

In a world quick to judge and increasingly disconnected and out of practice of reconciliation and forgiveness, quick to discard and slow to include, relentless compassion is revolutionary. It is the heart of God, beating within us, reshaping us into a community where no one is forgotten, no one is expendable, no one is beyond redemption.

And, heaven rejoices when the lost are found. That is this morning's comfort and invitation. That is the gospel: God's relentless compassion—naming what is broken, seeking what is lost, rejoicing when we are restored.

This call to action takes practice. It is fueled by God's grace, and it can be wildly uncomfortable; it IS counter cultural.

May each of us hear this call and navigate the week ahead with curiosity and not judgment, loving choices and not dismissal. May God work through us so that we have the energy to seek with relentless compassion and a commitment to joy and celebration when souls return. May each of us live as members of the St. Andrew's community marked by God's relentless compassion—received, embodied, and shared. Amen+