



### “Lost Cause”

Sermon preached by Anne R. Ledbetter

Sunday, October 31, 2010

Scripture – Luke 19:1-10

Have you ever been lost? Just two weeks ago, on our way back to Wilmington from the Women’s Retreat in Cape May, my friend and colleague Mary Beth Davis and I got lost. Don’t laugh – neither of us knows southern New Jersey. Paul, it’s like Newark – you can’t go there and **not** get lost! Truth be told, it was my fault. (No surprise there, huh?!) Mary Beth was navigator and I did not take the turn she indicated because, well, it felt too soon. Mary Beth also thought there was another way to get home, but gradually we realized that if we didn’t get some directions we would end up in Princeton! You might guess that we did not have a GPS – a **global positioning system** – in the car. We had gotten off course, and did not know how to find our way back. It became an urgent situation since we both had commitments at church later in the afternoon.

In our story this morning, it is Zacchaeus who is lost. He knows his way around Jericho, for he collects taxes there. But he has not found the roadmap to a fulfilling life. Luke identifies him as a chief tax collector who was rich – which implies that Zacchaeus had been fleecing his own people, collecting money for the Romans and adding enough for himself to live in high style. However, riches had not brought Zacchaeus happiness or satisfaction. Otherwise, why would he seek out the itinerant rabbi who is passing through town – this teacher who tells stories where a tax collector is not always the villain?

Eager to catch a glimpse of this remarkable teacher, Zacchaeus goes to the Main Street of Jericho where Jesus and his entourage are expected to pass, but the crowds are too thick and Zacchaeus cannot get a view. We are not sure whether Zacchaeus is hindered by his height, or the people have intentionally blocked him out – in angry rejection and retaliation. Regardless, Zacchaeus runs down the road and climbs a tree; not any tree – not a mimosa, nor a palm, but one of those Sycamore trees with full foliage where he can see but not be seen. It’s a good plan, but Jesus has a way of seeing us even when we want to hide.

As he passes by, Jesus looks up into the branches of this tree, and calls, “Come down, Zacchaeus, for I’m coming to your house for lunch today!” This story is full of exaggerations: A tax collector who abandons all social decorum and runs down the street; a rabbi who invites himself home for dinner with a social outcast. The crowds are understandably contemptuous – I

mean, would it miff us for the Dali Llama to choose a reputed shyster as his host? But after the meal an even more outrageous thing occurs: Zacchaeus announces that he is giving half of his wealth to the poor. What's more, anyone whom he has cheated will receive four times what is owed! Zacchaeus makes an about face. He exudes joy and transformation. Jesus declares him a son of Abraham, a member of God's family.

Luke makes no bones about this being a miracle story – a tax collector, one who is deemed by Jews as the lowest of the low, is called a son of Abraham by Jesus himself. But let's back up – it's Jesus who sees Zacchaeus, hiding up in that tree. Jesus, who in spite of what the crowd thinks, does NOT believe Zacchaeus is a lost cause. Jesus sees into Zacchaeus' heart. Jesus understands that Zacchaeus is rich in things but poor in soul, full of wealth but famished for God; and Jesus ensures that Zacchaeus is served a generous helping of the gospel, and gets to taste the good news of salvation. In response Zacchaeus exclaims repentance and generosity – issuing tax refunds left and right and vowing to make munificent restitution to any he has cheated.

I daresay each of us knows someone who we despair is a lost cause. A relative who cannot stay clean and sober. A teenager who thinks school is a waste of time. An adult child who refuses to grow up. A friend who contacts you only to borrow money. An in-law who treats you like the enemy. A co-worker who acts like every assignment is a competition. A street person who won't even accept the warm coat you try to give her. There are people in life on which we are ready to give up. But thankfully, God does not.

Luke reminds us that Jesus came to seek and save the lost. In other words, lost causes are God's business. Remember that earlier, in the fifteenth chapter of Luke, Jesus tells three stories emphasizing this perpetual work of God – to seek and save the lost.

1. There is the shepherd of the flock who will not rest until he finds the lone lost sheep.
2. The woman who thoroughly sweeps her house and crawls around on the floor until she locates her single lost coin.
3. And lastly, there is the father who sits by the window everyday watching plaintively for his lost son. Then, finally, one day the prodigal comes trudging up the road and the father runs out, wraps his arms around his son, kisses him, and calls for the servants to kill the fatted calf and call the neighbors over, because they have some serious rejoicing to do. You see, his son was lost but now was found, was thought dead but had come back to life.

Think again, have you yourself ever felt like the lost sheep who wandered away from the flock and ended up tangled in the thicket? Or the lost son, striking out on your own, only to realize one day that you are knee deep in pig dung? Or, have you ever felt disoriented and useless in life? You may have had the best financial year ever, but find yourself feeling empty inside. Or something happens which reminds you of the brevity of life, and you question the quality of your years. At times we may find ourselves adrift in a sea of regrets, stumbling through a desert of despair, wondering how we lost our way. We may get thrown off track by a terrible loss or tragedy, and find ourselves wandering aimlessly in a wilderness of grief, trapped in a forest of towering fears.

The good news is that there is always a way home. You see, we do have a GPS of sorts. That is, we have a God who Pursues Sinners --

a God who will not give up on any of us,  
a God whose primary cause is the lost,  
a God whose love will not be defeated by our waywardness,  
a God whose unrelenting passion is to seek and save.

For most of us, salvation is not something we experience once for all time, but rather a salve or healing balm which soothes and revives our souls again and again. It's like the voice in your Garmin which you may tune out, but which tells you when and where to turn. If you miss a turn, God's Spirit will stay after you, calling you to adjust your course so that you can find your way again.

Our divine GPS – this God who pursues sinners - sinners like us who get off track – supplies an indispensable GPS at every turn, that is, a **g**race which **p**urifies the soul. It is this sovereign grace which forever cleanses, comforts, strengthens and guides us through our life's journey.

In Jericho that day, Jesus showed the crowds that there are no lost causes in God's eyes; and neither should there be in ours. Moreover, Jesus revealed that the lost are indeed God's cause, for God is passionate about guiding them home, and when even one lost soul is saved, there is great cause for rejoicing.

As daughters and sons of the living God, we sometimes stray off life's path and repeatedly need that grace which purifies the soul. As followers of Jesus, we inherit his mission to seek and save the lost. Indeed the lost are to be our cause too. May we make it so.