Good Morning!

Today we have the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. These parables on "lostness" are actually leading up to the climax in the parable of the Prodigal Son…or more accurately the parable of the two lost sons which we don't read today.

Now what always helps in understanding Scriptures is figuring out just who Jesus is talking to. Today he is nearing Jerusalem. Thousands are coming to listen to Him and today's message is for those that have been deemed lost and outcast by the People of God and by Proxy they would be outcasts to God as well in their own minds…at least that's what they've been told by their religious leaders.

But you also have the grumbling Pharisees…wondering who is this Jesus and why are all these nobodies following Him. Make no mistake the crowd that followed Jesus was largely made up of people who were on the margins. People who were made invisible by the ruling class. These people had no worth and really didn't matter at all in the scheme of things…they weren't relevant! They were invisible to society…

And here's this Jesus guy giving them good news and hope of acceptance and belonging. He reminded them that God had not forgotten them and that they still had worth in God's eyes. Jesus told them, in fact, that they were so precious that God would leave everything and everyone else behind just to seek them out in order to restore them to the fold. Seeking that one lost coin so that God's coffers would be fully restored.

Now the Hebrew phrase for this is *Tikkun olam*" (it literally means, "world repair")…bringing it all back.

Something has been broken apart (diabolical) and that something must be brought back together and made whole once more… You think this concept might be important for us today as well…with all our division and divisiveness?

This was Jesus' ongoing work in restoring and repairing God's creation as was intended by our creator.

In God's creation everyone has worth, and everyone matters. And Paul gets right to the heart of this when he says "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Any lost sheep here today! The good news this morning is that God will always come seeking you out wherever and however you are… But keep your eyes and ears open my friends 'cause you may not recognize God when She does shows up.

Now there were also those listening to this Rabbi that did not believe they were lost…the good religious people of His day…the Pharisees…me/us…and Jesus in these three parables will do what Jesus does best. He comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.

In the parable that follows (The Lost Sons) Jesus calls out the ruling class - the so called people of God. He tells them they should also be in the business of Tikun Olam…but instead they have broken the world even further by placing a chasm between the "in group" the faithful of Israel… and the "out groups" that would be everyone else…Roman's, Lepers, Tax Collectors, Sinners, Woman, Children, Samaritans…and Luke by the way in his gospel addresses Jesus' acceptance of each and every one of these so called outcasts.

See the Righteous believed in their hearts that they were the chosen ones…and that they could earn what is rightfully theirs, but it came at the expense of those that really didn't matter much. The self-righteous (the older brother in the prodigal son parable) see they don't need a savior… they have already saved themselves…they followed the formula.

And Jesus once again tells them to be careful that in your self-proclaimed wisdom you don't yourself become lost! Remember your story Israel for even Solomon, the wisest among you, became very lost! So, are we Christians today in the business of world repair and reconciliation…and who are the outcasts for us that we need to seek and find in order to restore wholeness to creation?

When I first met my wife DeSha she introduced me to the Episcopal Church 25+ years ago, I was a devout Roman Catholic for 40 years or so. At that time a lot was missing in my life. I had just gone through a divorce, and my faith, instead of giving me answers, just seemed to make things worse. My religion and my faith had no relevance for my pain.

My wife is a cradle Episcopalian, When I entered this small Episcopal Church for first time it felt like oxygen to me, a breath of fresh air. It had all the familiar trimmings and trappings of my faith but with an authenticity and an inquiring mind…and the priest was married! I didn't even know that was possible. How cool was that! Relevance!

It felt like I had finally arrived…but little did I know what I was yet to become and am still becoming…if you want to make God laugh just pretend you have it all figured out! I still don't know what I'm gonna be when I grow up!

The priest here then Fr. Jeff Kirk saw something in me that I apparently did not…so he started out by asking me to bring communion to the sick and homebound here as an LEM…it felt good…I had arrived…finally!

One day a frail looking black women came into our church here. She seemed sweet, came for about 5 weeks straight then stopped coming. She didn't matter much to me other than exchanging pleasantries.

Then one Day the Priest asked me to visit with a Ms. Elizabeth Holden. I said sure thing! Now I had never been to an 8A apartment complex before. I

thought there at Lindenwold Towers I was visiting a lost sheep… but here… I looked like the lost sheep.

Hundreds of dingy little apartments, housing old and frail people who society had forgotten and had no use for. Each week they had at least one death there and I felt very uncomfortable!

So I made my way to the 6th floor and passed by the cookie cutter doors until I found her apartment. She opened the door and what greeted me instead of a sheep was more like a wolf with claws and fangs.

She immediately called out the failings of our church here. How we had not even noticed her missing. She wrote a four-page letter to the Rector calling out this church to live like Christ intended…of course Jeff never told me all this.

I was the sacrificial lamb here taking the brunt of Ms. Holden's chastising and scolding! I felt very uncomfortable! After she tore into me and our church she reverted back into a sweet little old lady.

We sat there and talked, and those weekly visits lasted for over five years. Elizabeth soon became a part of my family…Her life came to matter very much to us!

I learned her story: When she was young her fiancée died in a tragic car accident a week before their wedding. She was in her twenty's and devastated – she never married. But if she was angry with God, she never showed it.

She followed Jesus with all her heart, and she had a thirst for her Bible… we talked often of passages and their meanings. Her real hallmark though was that she was never shy to speak out whenever and wherever she saw injustice…she was tenacious and unrelenting.

But that made people around her uncomfortable…she only had a couple friends and was also ostracized even by her own family for her outspokenness.

Now by definition she was invisible to the world: She was Black, she was Cherokee, she was a women and she was frail…prone to bouts of dizziness and feinting which kept her homebound in her later years. But she never ever acted invisible to those around her.

In her invisibility she taught me the meaning of social systematic dehumanization in America. She was an activist during the sixties, she marched. She worked with her close friend Helen Keller in NY.

She worked in Wash DC on changing segregation laws and policies that kept the downtrodden down…she helped rewrite laws and policies under the Kennedy Administration.

…and her lessons continued for me! What first started out as delivering communion to one person a week – just Elizabeth. Soon turned into 20 and then 50 people as she invited the entire complex there to live into Christian community together.

You should have seen Fr. Kirk's face when I started to put those numbers in the books…there were more folks there than we had at our own services on Sunday. He soon started doing a communion service for them once a month and eventually our church adopted them all… Cooking and sharing Christmas and Easter dinners with them.

…and upon my ordination to the diaconate, she gave me the most precious and the most expensive gift I received. My communion kit for when I visit the sick and homebound. To this day I have no idea where she got the $500 dollars to buy it. And so, I carry Elizabeth with me whenever I go to visit the "lost sheep". So, I ask you who was really lost… and who was really found???

When she died, I did her funeral here and I gave her Eulogy out there in the memorial garden to a small group of family and friends. I was the executor of her will, which was very easy to do because she had nothing. She was spent.

Her life was marked by bearing fruit and living for others…even those who tried to make her invisible… she refused to live in a man-made kingdom; she preferred the kingdom of God! Thank you, Elizabeth, for finding this lost goat!

In the end it's not about slogans and clichés' "who's life matters more or less. I think deep down everyone in this building knows that we all matter to God.

But I think what the Christian response should always be is a one-on-one affair at the level of the heart…where one person shows another person - that your life matters to me.

In the end Elizabeth's life mattered so very much to me and I saw Christ's love poured out through her…and my life mattered so very much to her…and she saw Christ's love poured out through me! It's reciprocal…its relational…that's how it all works… as God intended!

As a church let's try and look at what's important… let's see how we can connect with the lost in this community right here! This is a chance for us to be present for someone who has become invisible or lost… a chance for us to show someone that their lives are still important to someone – and that someone is YOU!

But be wary my friends, because when seeking the lost…it will often be you that is found!

Amen!

Your Faithful Servant,

carmen