

**14 Pentecost
September 15, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

As Luke sets the scene in our reading this morning, Jesus is in trouble once again for hanging out with the wrong people. As “all the tax collectors and sinners” come near to listen to him, the Pharisees and scribes begin to grumble: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

In response, Jesus tells the scandalized religious insiders two parables. In the first, a shepherd leaves his flock of ninety-nine to look for a single lamb that is lost. He searches until he finds it, and when he does, he carries that one lamb home on his shoulders, invites his friends and neighbors over, and throws a party to celebrate.

In the second, a woman loses one of her ten silver coins. Immediately, she lights a lamp and sweeps her entire house, looking carefully for the coin until she finds it. Then, like the shepherd, she calls together her friends and neighbors and asks them to celebrate the recovery of the coin: “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.”

Now, today is the Feast Day of Cyprian of Carthage, a bishop martyred in 258AD for refusing to worship and sacrifice to the pagan Roman gods. What does this story about Jesus, and the parables he shares, tell us about the namesake of this parish ... about our patron saint? And, what do we know about Cyprian, and does it really matter? What does this person who lived 1,800 years ago have to do with us today?

Every so often I get the questions our church. Some people have asked me about the “Cypriot Church” ... “Is that a Christian faith?” They are confused and thought Cyprian was related to the island of Cyprus ... which I can understand. But, when I tell them that we are an “Episcopal Church” named after an early Christian bishop who lived in Carthage they often look puzzled ... “Where was Carthage?” And, then there are also those who ask “What is an Episcopal Church?”

So, let me give you a little background. Carthage was a city in northern Africa on the Mediterranean coast in what is now Tunisia. It was just west of Sicily. It was the third largest city in the ancient world behind Rome and Alexandria. And, Carthage was widely considered to be the most important trading hub of the ancient Mediterranean and was possibly one of the most affluent cities of the ancient world.

Cyprian ... our namesake ... was born around 200 to 210AD. Cyprian was from a prominent family, and he was given the benefit of a good education. As a young man Cyprian taught rhetoric, and eventually started a career as a lawyer. However, in his mid-thirties he began

questioning his life choices. The inequities between rich and poor, as well as his disgust with the immorality generally prevalent at the time, would be strong factors that would lead him to sell much of his property, give the money to the poor and embrace the Christian faith. These are his words about what happened ...

When I was still lying in darkness and gloomy night, I used to regard it as extremely difficult and demanding to do what God's mercy was suggesting to me ... I myself was held in bonds by the innumerable errors of my previous life, from which I did not believe I could possibly be delivered, so I was disposed to acquiesce in my clinging vices and to indulge my sins ... But after that, by the help of the water of new birth, the stain of my former life was washed away, and a light from above, serene and pure, was infused into my reconciled heart ... a second birth restored me to a new man. Then, in a wondrous manner every doubt began to fade. ... I clearly understood that what had first lived within me, enslaved by the vices of the flesh, was earthly and that what, instead, the Holy Spirit had wrought within me was divine and heavenly.

Cyprian was an influential man in his community so his conversion drew both attention and controversy. In the Church he was seen as a rising star and was ordained deacon, and then priest within a year. Then just two years later, at age 38, he was elected Bishop of Carthage. Yet, some of his fellow senior clergy, and other bishops, complained.

This was a difficult time in the life of the early Christian Church, especially in relationship with the Roman government. Periodic edicts from the Emperor required all persons in the Empire to worship and sacrifice to the Roman gods ... otherwise they could have their possessions confiscated, or they could even be put to death.

This put many of those early Christians in a difficult spot ... between a rock and a hard place. Some newly converted Christians would renounce their Christian faith to save themselves during a persecution, but when the persecution was over, they asked to return to the Church. The question for the Church authorities was "Should they be allowed back into the fold, or not?" Some bishops said "no" ... others said "yes" ... others said "yes" with conditions. Cyprian was a champion for those seeking to return ... he did not give up on those who were lost.

I wonder where Cyprian might have learned that kind of hospitality ... such a radical stance in the early Church? Could it be from the gospel reading we heard this morning?

In light of the criticism Jesus received from the Pharisees and scribes I should note that the words "hospital," "hospitality," and "hostile" ... as in a "hostile" threat ... all come from the same root word which means "stranger" or "enemy." "Hospitality" is that relationship between a host and their guest ... or stranger ... or, in some cases, enemy. Interestingly, as Jesus is showing radical "hospitality" to those who others deem strangers, he is met with "hostile" criticism from the Pharisees and the scribes.

Yet, the fact is that the life of Jesus revealed the heart of God. Luke writes, "this man welcomes sinners and eats with them." To emphasize this divine welcome ... this radical hospitality ... God's unconditional acceptance ... Jesus tells these two parables that repeat the same point ... the lost sheep, and the lost coin.

The "sinners" that Jesus welcomed in radical hospitality were those who were ritually unclean in his world. The tax collector who handled money with the Emperor's image on it ... an idol. The prostitute who was ritually unclean because of the laws dealing with feminine hygiene. The persons with skin sores because of the prohibition against open wounds. The blind, or deaf, or lame because they must be sinners otherwise God would not have let this happen to them. Jesus ate with them. He accepted them in radical hospitality.

And, people felt safe with Jesus. He exuded compassion. Jesus welcomed all the people who were ignored and despised. The sexually suspicious. The religiously impure. Ethnic outsiders. Rich tax collectors. The chronically sick and the mentally deranged. Women, widows and children. All those that society placed on the outside felt safe with Jesus ... they knew his compassion.

The only people who didn't feel safe with Jesus were the religious experts who appointed themselves as gatekeepers of God's love. In Jesus' time, those gatekeepers were the Temple priest and the Pharisees. By the time of Cyprian, those gatekeepers were other bishops in the early Church. All of them had good reasons to feel unsafe.

When Jesus welcomed the unwelcome, when he accepted the unacceptable without any preconditions, he angered the religious experts. Luke says that they "grumbled" and "muttered."

Whether then or now, there's a bitter irony in how the simple act of accepting a person angers some people. Cyprian's stance ... as Bishop of Carthage ... was controversial. However, whereas the gatekeepers get angry, Jesus says twice that there's "joy in heaven" when the lost is found.

One thing we have to remember is that the lost lamb in the first parable belongs to the shepherd's flock from the very beginning of the story ... it is his lamb. Likewise, the coin in the second parable belongs to the woman before she loses it ... the coin is one of her very own. In other words, these parables are not about lost outsiders finding salvation and becoming Christians. These parables are about us, the insiders. So, the larger question is how do I know this story to be true in my life today?

You see, being lost happens to all of God's people. It is not that we cross over from a state of being sinfully lost to a state righteous found-ness once-and-for-all. In spite of the words of the hymn Amazing Grace ... "I once was lost, but no I am found," that is not how it really works. The fact is that we get lost over and over again, and God finds us over and over again. Being lost is not a sacrilegious aberration ... it is part and parcel of the life of faith.

But what does it mean to be lost? I believe it means that we lose our sense of belonging ... we lose our capacity to trust ... we lose our felt experience of God's presence ... we lose our will to persevere. Some of us get lost when illness enters on our lives and God's goodness starts to look not-so-good. Some of us get lost when death comes to someone we love ... too soon and/or too suddenly ... and we are left reeling. Some of us get lost when our marriages die. Some of us get lost when our children break our hearts. Some of us get lost in the throes of addiction, or anxiety, or lust, or unforgiveness, or hatred, or bitterness.

Some of us get lost within the very walls of the Church. We get lost when prayer feels empty and turns to dust in our mouths. When the Scriptures we once loved look like smudges on the page. When the hymns we sing sound like fingernails on a blackboard. When sitting in a pew on a Sunday morning becomes boring ... or worst it makes our skin crawl. When even the most well-intentioned sermon sucks the oxygen out of our lungs. We are really lost when the bread and wine that once nourished us now leaves us hungry, cranky, bewildered, or bored.

Yes, we get lost. We get so miserably lost that the shepherd has to search through the craggy wilderness to find us. We get so wholly lost that the woman living alone has to light her lamp, pick up her broom, and sweep out every nook and cranny of her house to discover what's become of us. We get lost when something drives us away from our faith, and we are not sure if we are welcome back ... or even if we can find a way back.

Those who were "lost" in the time of Cyprian had other life-or-death issues to deal with ... persecutions for one. So, what informed Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, as he had to decide how to respond? Eighteen hundred years ago Cyprian of Carthage knew these parables well, and as he took seriously what Jesus took seriously these stories informed his hospitality to bring healing to a Church broken under these persecutions. He had personal experience of a life of being lost. According to his writings there were times, even as bishop, when he felt lost. Yet, Cyprian also wrote about being found ... over and over again found by God.

Today, our namesake and patron informs us ... as we take seriously what Jesus took seriously ... about how we live into that radical hospitality to bring healing to the broken world around us.

Amen.