Calling In: To Seek and Serve Christ in All People

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
September 14, 2025: Luke 15:1-10; I Timothy 1:12-17

Usually when I'm preparing to write a sermon for Sunday morning I read the gospel story for the day and try to notice what details stand out to me, and this time, I noticed the lavish effort put forth by the shepherd looking for the lost sheep and the woman sweeping her house looking for the lost coin. I noticed it because it was hard to immediately relate to either story. I can tell you I would not move couches and shine flashlights to find a coin, and I've never spent any time with sheep, so I don't know the first thing about being a shepherd. But it got me asking myself what I *would* go to extreme lengths to find if it was lost. A wedding ring. A passport. A lost pet. And I don't even want to imagine what it would be like to have a beloved person in my life go missing. The unimaginable lengths to which I would go to find them.

What this story is highlighting is an immense sense of the priceless value of each person. Every single person, without exception, has innate value. And in today's gospel reading, Jesus is specifically discussing not just people who are devalued by society, but people who have done wrong. People like tax collectors who have oppressed and taken advantage of other people. The gospel is highly inconvenient in that it insists Jesus came to the world to save, not just those who we like to feel sorry for like people who are hungry or homeless, but to save people who don't seem to deserve it. The reading from First Timothy highlights this. The Apostle Paul had been a terrible man. He was a relentless persecutor of those who followed Jesus. He hunted them high and low, put them in prison and had them put to death. He was violent, merciless, and without compassion. This was the man God chose to become one of the greatest Apostles.

So what is it that we, as followers of Jesus' Way of Love, are to do? What do mercy and grace really mean? Surely we are not just supposed to look past the great and terrible wrongs being committed everywhere you look in today's world, and welcome everyone without distinction as our mission statement insists?

Author Loretta Ross wrote a book called *Calling In: How to Start Making Change with Those You'd Rather Cancel*. Loretta Ross had been a social justice activist for years and had worked at a rape crisis center with victims of sexual assault and abuse. She herself had been a victim of multiple sexual assaults as a child and teenager and so her work was personal. She had learned how to call out bad behavior and how to publicly name the wrong when injustice was committed. These are important skills to have in one's toolbox. But in this book, she talks about how one day, the rape crisis center where she was the director got a very unexpected letter. The letter was from a man in prison serving a life sentence for rape and murder. The letter more or less said this: "Outside I raped women; inside I rape men.

I'd like not to be a rapist anymore. Can you help me?" She talks about how at first, she and the other employees of the rape crisis center felt angry and disgusted and thought, absolutely not, we will not help you. Our mission is to help survivors of sexual assault, not perpetrators, and we don't have enough resources as it is. But the more she thought about it, the more she realized she really did want to be part of preventing sexual assault from happening in the first place. And this man had reached out and asked for help. He wanted to stop, and didn't know how. So she went to the prison and initiated what ended up being a three year program with a group of men all convicted of violent sexual crimes, all of whom had also been likely both victims and perpetrators of further sexual violence in prison, and who wanted to break the cycle. In her book she says they desperately wanted to reclaim their humanity. Over the course of the three years, they gained trust in each other. She told them her story and they told her their stories. She taught them black feminist theory and different paradigms about intimacy and power. She said this:

> They had seemed nothing but evil to me until they helped me see them in all their complexities, with all their challenges and contradictions. By the end of our sessions, I appreciated and respected them as co-conspirators working to end rape.[1]

At the foundation of this relationship was the desire to make change and even a spark of hope that it could be possible. When we write people completely off as irretrievably evil or broken, we also write off the possibility of them ever changing, and more deeply, we deny

[1] Loretta Ross, *Calling In: How to Start Making Change with Those You'd Rather Cancel* (Simon & Schuster, 2025) at 25.

the deep goodness of the whole person at their core. In her book, Loretta Ross says she knows that hurt people hurt people and that she herself was no exception. In her own trauma as a survivor of sexual assault, she had not always been the kind of mother she wanted to be, and she wanted to heal enough not to pass her hurt along. She learned that the men she worked with had themselves been deeply hurt and were seeking a way to transform their hurt so that it no longer came out as violence against others.

Now, most of us will never be called to do something as extreme as work with convicted sexual offenders to help them change and heal. But what every one of us is called to do in today's world is to re-commit ourselves to the deep work of what our baptismal covenant calls "seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves." There is so much wisdom in that one sentence. To seek and serve Christ in all persons is to affirm that at their core there is the image of God, divine goodness, and that the image of God can be sought after as carefully as a shepherd looking for a lost sheep or a woman sweeping her house for a coin or something priceless that has been lost. To love our neighbors as ourselves means we know we have much in common with all humanity—that we ourselves have hurt others out of our own hurt, every one of us, and we are all capable of both great goodness and great evil.

The great project of the gospel is to regain our commitment to seeking and bringing out the divine goodness in other people. To help each other reclaim our humanity where we have lost it. This is not a codependent look-the-other-way idealism. It is to do what Loretta Ross refers to as "calling In." Not calling out—there is plenty of accusing and blaming and naming people's bad behavior everywhere we turn—but calling *in*: calling for better from people while believing that no one can be reduced to the worst thing they have ever done. In her book she describes how to "call in," and our own Rie Gilsdorf has created a class about this topic that we hope to have in the coming months.

So let me ask you something. Do you believe you yourself can heal enough from hurts you have received not to pass that hurt along to others? I hope the answer is yes, if you want to, with God's help. And there is the crux: these men in prison wanted to change. People who see no need to change themselves will not, and there is nothing we can do about that. But what we can do is hold the image of core goodness in our hearts and minds, and make the effort to seek and serve it in each other. We can be on the lookout and wait for those moments where change is possible, and then do our best to support and call in that change.

The next story in Luke's gospel that Jesus tells to illustrate what it looks like to seek the lost is the story of the prodigal son. When the prodigal leaves the father and his brother to spend his inheritance with dissolute living, there is nothing the father can do about it.
The son does not want to change. The moment where the gospel can be enacted is when the son comes home, ragged and stinking and hungry and destitute. The father could have chosen that moment to berate his son, to condemn him, to unleash the anger and hurt and betrayal he surely must have felt. He could have accepted him back begrudgingly—endlessly punishing him for the harm he had committed. If I'm honest I know I'd be tempted to do that. The son deserved it. But all the father expressed was the joy and deep relief and compassion for his son who had been lost and who had returned.

Every person who has lost their humanity through committing violence in thought, word or deed is loved by someone. The shooter at Annunciation had parents and friends. All of us are children of God, the God who wants us to be whole and who is deeply grieved when we deny our humanity and hurt one another.

Let us look for the moments when we can seek and serve Christ in each other. Let us heal our own hurts so that we do not pass them on to other people. Let us remember that everyone is sacred at their core, everyone is loved by God, and allow ourselves to be agents of the gospel—of healing and restoration, believing change is possible. **Amen.**