

The inspiration for this sermon comes from the two parables of Jesus that we heard today in the Gospel of Luke. The title for this sermon, **“Found at the Pound by the Hound”**, originates in a 19th Century poem penned by Francis Thompson, titled “The Hound of Heaven.” The poem begins, “I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears I hid from Him.”

The poet knows that the “The Hound of Heaven” from whom he attempts to run and hide is none other than Jesus Christ. Jesus, the hound of heaven relentlessly and passionately pursues the poet with the love that will never let him go, the love of God, the love of God that has no end and no beginning. Thompson, the poet, knew a lot about fleeing, running, seeking to escape from God, and in truth his earthly life ended less in triumph because the drug addiction into which he had slid would eventually lead to a premature death. No matter, Thompson, because of the depth of his fears and his despair, because of the extent and the speed of his running away, because of the lows that were not relieved by temporary highs, offers us in his image of the Hound of heaven, a truly remarkable image for all of us to cling to of our God, the God who loves and pursues all of us sinners, relentlessly.

Some of us may have a problem with the fact that Thompson himself turns out not to be a heroic, successful figure. As a society we prefer our heroes to ride off into the sunset at the end of the movie having triumphed. The problem with such a limited view is that we know that real life is very rarely like this, that motives are more mixed, endings more nuanced, triumphs, at least our triumphs more passing. No matter, the truth to which Thompson points us is the Gospel – however broken he may have been in his own life, maybe because of how broken he was, Thompson glimpsed and grasped the truth that alone could save him and all of us humans. That truth being the Good News that God, “The Hound of Heaven” is absolutely single-minded in loving all of us. That God is fully and absolutely committed to loving the world and all of creation. That God is stubborn, absolutely stubborn in loving us even when we ignore that love, or run away from that love, or declare that we don’t need God. In Jesus Christ, God has shared God’s very self with us and embraces us, welcomes us, cherishes us both in this life and in the life that is to come.

This, my friends, is the Gospel truth that we are lost save for God’s gracious and loving and persistent intervention in the life of the world and in our lives. This is the ‘Good News’ truth, that we are lost, save for God’s gracious and loving and persistent intervention in the life of the world and in our lives. It is Good News that we are sinners, because God loves sinners, God seeks sinners, God saves sinners!

As sinners, we are on the run from God. Some of us are on the run at times quite actively, but all of us are on the run somehow, often quite quietly – at home, at work, even at church. All of us are on the run from God even during those times when we are moving towards God for this is our human nature. Until we are gathered into the great congregation of the faithful, we will always be on the run from God. In some way, in some element of our living, in some aspect of our personality we will be running from the God loves us. Sometimes we will run from God by sitting or standing stubbornly still, arms folded, eyes closed, minds shut, unwilling to be moved by the grace of God, preferring to imagine we know what is best.

Somewhere, somehow, some way each of us, every one of us, is seeking to outrun or avoid the “Hound of heaven”. Within some of our actions, attitudes, aims, attainments, aspirations, approaches, aptitudes, ambitions, accomplishments, activities, advances, abilities, or achievements we are resisting the loving

embrace of our Savior. In all manner of ways we seek to do what is finally impossible, but we try it anyway and it wears us out, we seek to hold God at arm's length imagining that we know how much God is good for us or how much God we need or how much God we can handle. This running wears us out when all along the hope that we are invited to embrace is that God is a relentless lover of all people and all creation, that God has not and never will give up on loving the cosmos and all that lives in creation.

This issue about God loving sinners, about Jesus having time for the tax collectors and other outcasts was bothersome throughout Jesus' ministry. This same issue that God loves sinners, that God is the Divine Lover, has been bothersome throughout Christian history because there have always been voices who would wish to declare or set limits on whom and what God can love, imagining that God can only care for some certain subset of humanity that those who think in such a way include in their self-drawn circle. Even down to today, we have the need to maintain the truth that God loves all people and that those who love God, in and through Jesus Christ are called to love all people in God's name and in like manner as God loves.

Let me put an edge on such a statement which surely is needed this week and today. God, the God of Jesus Christ, loves all people, and that includes those who today follow the faith of Islam, and given this there would never be any justification for any who name Christ as Lord and Savior to burn copies of the Koran, or bomb mosques, or kill Muslims, or demean or discriminate against people because of their faith or culture or tradition. We have travelled this path previously, in the Crusades and in other wars and disputes and we need to conclude and re-conclude that there is another way that we need to go, the way that is love. This way of love is **not** political correctness, it is the way of Jesus Christ. FOUND by our Savior, our motivation, our attitude, our bearing has to be that of our Savior. FOUND by our Savior, our calling is to seek to live into our faith, to share our faith in deeds and in words, not declaring superiority.

The two parables of Jesus that we heard in our reading from the Gospel of Luke today provide a clear scriptural basis for the thought of us and all people being, "**Found** at the Pound by the Hound." These two parables are usually known as the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin and indeed that is the editorial comment imposed on them even in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Please remember that these little section headings are not part of the actual text of the Scriptures. Sure we can as we hear these stories understand them as the parables of the lost sheep or the lost coin. But wouldn't it be more true to say that these two parables are the parable of the FOUND sheep and the FOUND coin – because that is the climax of each of the stories. The lesson we are to take from the two parables is that the shepherd and the woman represent God in how they continue their relentless search for what had been lost until the sheep and the coin are FOUND! Once they are FOUND a reckless party and celebration is hosted by the one who FOUND them – a party to which friends and neighbors, the entire community is invited. Parties that almost certainly cost way more than what had been lost but because the sheep and the coin are FOUND there is need for a gracious, wild, heavenly celebration, because the angels of heaven rejoice whenever even one sinner repents and discovers God's welcome.

Look around the Sanctuary this morning; can you just imagine the party that has been going on in heaven for all of us, the sinners of Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church? Can you just imagine the extent of the celebration held for all the people who have come to see that there is a place for them in the heart of God?

God is deeply in love with each of us. Not just humanity in general, but each and every person. God is like a woman who will turn her house upside down to find even one coin. God is like a shepherd who will search high and low for even one sheep. There are no bramble bushes, no deep ravines, no alley ways, no hidden corners into which God will not go to find those who are lost.

The shepherd was thorough, but he was not miserly – he finds one sheep and throws a welcome home party. The woman may be meticulous, but she is not a wizard of home economics. She found one coin, and then spent who knows how many to throw a party! Two parties that are pictures of grace, God's grace.

FOUND at the POUND by the HOUND our lives are to be spent in the cause of seeking and finding and celebrating. Having been FOUND by God it is not God's plan to tuck us away in some secure sheepfold separating us from the world; it is not God's plan to place us in a secure safe-deposit box. Rather God says, "Let's have a party now." I would suggest that it is this heavenly party that we need to take on the road, that we need to open up to and offer to the entire community, it is this party of being FOUND, of having a place, of being embraced and welcomed and loved by God that ought to stir us and shake us and shape us and send us out and up and over and to and towards and for every person and place and need.

FOUND at the POUND by the HOUND, the party begins in worship this morning as recognize and respond to who God is and all God has done for us, acknowledging that all we are and all we have and are comes from God, and belongs to God, and is loved by God, and is to be given and offered and spent for God. FOUND at the POUND by the HOUND we offer our all, our time, our talents, our money, passions, our imaginations, our minds in God's service here in this place, out into our community and on into the world. FOUND at the POUND by the HOUND we party on, sharing the diversity and unity of our ministries as a church, demonstrating and celebrating with all people the discovery of the love that God has for the world, that all and each are valuable, that all and each are important to God, that all and each are needed as we continue God's work of seeking and finding and celebrating: FOUND at the POUND by the HOUND. People of God, Party on! Amen.