

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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WITH

Sermon preached at the 11 a.m. service, September 15, 2013

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Luke 15:1-10

Some weeks just flow past, filled with routine. Last week wasn't one of those. This past week felt to me full-to-bursting with really big events, and full of unusual twists of fate—some hopeful, some heartbreaking.

At this very time last Sunday, when we were gathered in this space for worship, American airstrikes against Syria seemed imminent. That felt to me like dark clouds gathering, like a heavy weight pressing on my chest, all the more disturbing to me for occurring as close as it did to September 11.

Only two days later, by the time President Obama spoke to the nation on Tuesday night, a surprise alternative had appeared. The alternative was embryonic and fragile, but enough—for the moment—to forestall more violence in the name of peace. I breathed a little easier. The clouds lifted just a bit and turned a shade less dark.

By the end of the week (yesterday), a completely unexpected, unprecedented agreement had been reached. The United States and Russia reached a deal to destroy Syria's chemical weapons, an endeavor called by *The New York Times* "one of the most challenging undertakings in the history of arms control."

[<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/15/world/middleeast/syria-talks.html?hp>] This deal is a beginning point for a hard and uncertain path ahead, a path filled with question marks, uncertainties, possibly some land mines. None of us knows how this will play out. Many will risk and seek in this effort; some will seek the actual weapons. Many of us will seek by doing the only things we can: We wait. We hope. We pray.

Immediately after the President's speech on Tuesday night, the New York City primary election results began to trickle in—and some are still coming in. The night held surprises, particularly in those high-profile races for mayor and comptroller. Counting of paper ballots starts tomorrow. As yet, the primary for mayor has not been declared won or conceded.

On Wednesday morning I headed out to St. Bart's to take part in our September 11 service. I walked from my apartment to the subway between 8:30 and 9am, taking my usual route through the city blocks. But this day, as I passed the fire station on East 85th Street, I noticed something unusual: the dozen or so firefighters of that station were standing shoulder to shoulder in a silent semi-circle facing the sidewalk. They stood in front of the open fire station doors, two fire trucks visible behind them. On the sidewalk next to the station were bouquets of flowers and candles burning. On the wall above the candles and flowers were the nine photos of their firefighter brothers from that station who perished on 9/11.

The witness of that silent semi-circle was stunning and powerful, creating a deep space in the rush of the morning. Quite unexpectedly, there were tears in my eyes. I saw everyone who passed by fall silent; they quit texting or talking on their phones.

When I got close enough to see this detail, I had to smile through my tears: In the center of that silent semi-circle, in the same posture as her firefighters, was the firehouse cat, a white and tabby mix wearing a collar and green tag. The cat had joined her firefighters and remained crouched, immobile, as still and silent as they.

A few hours later here in this space we offered our annual 9/11 service of hope and remembrance. A service started for our own firefighter neighbors (on 51st St) who perished and for their families, but a service open to all and attended by hundreds. A service held for enough years that our clergy, staff and members and the firefighters and their families recognize each other on sight. It is a bittersweet homecoming. Photos of those lost rest here on these ledges. There was silence in our service, too. There was also music and words and shared bread and wine that brought us together, shoulder to shoulder. There was a deep space created here that morning, too. And there were tears.

Life started to feel "normal" again on Thursday, but that afternoon we heard the news that the boardwalk at Seaside Park and Seaside Heights on the Jersey Shore was destroyed by fire. Video reports showed raging flames, huge black clouds of smoke billowing into the air. This same boardwalk and its many small businesses had been destroyed in Superstorm Sandy less than a year ago. That area suffering the worst of the storm's damage. They had been painstakingly restored, and the business owners were still trying to get back on their feet. Now, gone again. I've never been to the Jersey Shore, but my heart breaks for that community.

And then on Friday, news and photos of the terrible flooding around Boulder, Colorado. The rushing brown water (from drone photos), stranded residents being airlifted out, the joyful reunion of parents hugging their

5th graders plucked from a mountainside field trip and returned safely to them. Some perished; 200 are still lost, unaccounted for. Tragedy and joy closely intertwined.

Amidst all this, schools started up again this week around here. We'll have Blessing of Backpacks later in the service, to recognize and grace the upcoming school year and all that it holds. New schools, new teachers, new grades, new challenges, new friends, new experiences, new learnings. Over this next year, there will be daily tragedies and daily joys, small and large, often within minutes of each other, closely intertwined.

All of these events, from world to local, are not just news reports. These stories represent a slice of life—our life. They remind us that we are not solitary beings, or even insulated beings, though sometimes closing the world out seems tempting. We are all dealing, as best we can, with what is close to home for us in a given week. Maybe what's close to home for us is starting school, or voting, or grieving. These reports remind us that for someone else, a business destroyed by fire is the close-to-home thing. Or a flooded house, or a house washed away, or a lost child being found and brought safely home. The threat of military force and this fragile hope of a peaceful solution are equally close to home for those in Syria and for us in the United States, and for most if not all of the world.

These stories from our everyday life, like these two everyday-life parables Jesus tells—the lost/found sheep and the lost/found coin—keep calling us into community.

We may not relate much to sheep, but I bet we all relate to losing 1% of our net worth. Who in their right mind would risk their own life and the security of the 99% to go (into danger) after their lost 1%? Who wouldn't accept a 1% loss as an acceptable cost of doing business? *

We may relate more easily to the woman who loses 10% of her net worth. Her search doesn't involve as much risk as the shepherd's—it's closer to home. But which of us wouldn't expend some effort, especially low-risk effort, to get back our lost 10%?

There is a third parable in this series that we don't read today: the parable of the Prodigal Son. The father has two sons and loses one: a 50% loss. Yet the father can't go out and search. He waits at home—as close to home as you can get. The father seeks in the only way he can. He waits. He hopes. He prays.

All three of these everyday-life parables have the same ending. The pattern is seek, find, rejoice. When the seeker finds what was lost, she or he invites friends and neighbors to celebrate: Rejoice with me! Not rejoice *for* me, but rejoice *with* me.

Rejoicing *with*, sharing another's joy, is the call to community. I'd say the flip side is the same: Grieving *with* another, sharing another's grief over whatever has been lost—a loved one, a business, a home—is the call to community, too.

Many of us likely know that familiar image of the shepherd carrying the sheep over his shoulders safely home. That is one of the most ancient images in our Church. Yes, God goes to extraordinary lengths to seek us and find us and bring us home. I am profoundly comforted and thankful for that, because all of us get lost from time to time. But these particular parables call us not to see ourselves as the lost ones. Rather, they call us to be the seekers. We are called to seek those who are lost, and when the lost is found—by us or by someone else—we are called to rejoice *with*, to rejoice in community.

It can be hard to take joy in someone else's good fortune—it is actually easier to envy it. And it can be easy to ignore someone else's suffering, especially if it is not close to home. But Jesus uses these simple parables to counteract our very human tendencies toward self-reliance and self-absorption.

To rejoice with, to grieve with, is to recognize and honor our relationship with another. In our particular tradition we are doing that in a very public way right now. At the heart of our worship is Eucharist, gathering at this holy table to re-member our relationships with each other, with the Christ of our faith, with God.

What more powerful reminder of God's call to community than gathering at this table, with those we may know and those we may not know, with those like us and those different from us, and to recognize our common relationship before God?

Whenever we recognize others as our brothers and sisters, here in this way or any other way, surely God says to the company of angels, "Rejoice with me!"

And there is rejoicing in heaven.

* I am indebted for this understanding of these parables to *Conversing with Scripture: The Parables*, by William Brosend, Morehouse c 2006, Chapter 3.