Malcolm Clemens Young Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2C35 Psalm 14

14 Pentecost (Proper 19C) 11:00 a.m. Eucharist & Town Hall 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Sunday 11 September 2022 Luke 15:1-10

**God Is Looking for You**

“Rejoice with me for I have found my sheep that was lost” (Lk. 15).

Mark Johnson and George Lakoff’s *Metaphors We Live By* is one of my favorite books. These authors point out that simple unexamined metaphors lie behind the very structure of our thought. The idea of “argument as war” is an example. We talk about winning an argument, an indefensible position, being right on target, shooting down an assumption, etc. We could imagine another culture regarding argument as being more like a kind of dance.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Today Jesus addresses two primal understandings of religion that deeply influenced the people of his society and our own. The first is the idea of a spiritual quest, a search for God. The second idea is that of church as a community of saints set apart from the world. Jesus upsets assumptions that lie so deep in our consciousness that we simply assume that this is just what life in God means.

1. The spiritual quest. On December 24, 1915 Albert Einstein was drinking tea in his Berlin apartment when he received a crumpled, muddy, blood-stained letter from the trenches of World War I. It contained a message from the great genius and astronomer Karl Schwarzschild (1873-1916). Let me quote the letter’s final words. “As you see, the war treated me kindly enough, in spite of heavy gunfire, to allow me to get away from it all and take this walk in the land of your ideas.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

The letter astounded Einstein not simply because one of the most respected scientists in Germany was commanding an artillery unit on the Russian front, or because of the author’s fear of a coming catastrophe. In tiny print on the back page, only legible through the use of a magnifying glass, Schwarzschild had sent him the first exact solution to the Einstein field equations of general relativity.

Schwarzschild’s approach worked well on a normal star which you might imagine as being like a bowling ball sitting on your bed and gently compressing the space around it. The problem arises when a large star exhausts its fuel and collapses. That star would keep compressing until the force of gravity grew to be so great that space would become infinitely curved and closed in on itself. The result would be, “an inescapable abyss permanently cut off from the rest of the universe.”

Out of a sense of duty and perhaps also to show that a faithful Jew could be a good German, Schwarzschild volunteered to serve in the war. During a mustard gas attack he helped two of his men put on masks. Slow to put on his own, this exposure may have been what initiated an autoimmune disorder that painfully covered his body with sores and killed him months later.

At first Schwarzschild dismissed his discovery as a kind of mathematical anomaly, but over time it began to really frighten him. In his last letter from Russia to his wife he wrote that this idea, “has an irrepressible force and darkens all my thoughts. It is a void without form or dimension, a shadow I can’t see, but one that I can feel with the entirety of my soul.”

A young man named Richard Courant stayed up talking with Schwarzschild on the night before he died. Schwarzschild told him that this concentration of mass would distort space and causality.[[3]](#endnote-3) The true horror was that since light would never escape from it, this singularity was unknowable, utterly unchanging, entirely isolated from everything else. Schwarzschild was one of the first people to contemplate the meaning of a black hole.[[4]](#endnote-4) But all of us are quite capable of imagining a place completely cut off from God. In fact most of us have been there.

Isolation can feel terrifying. Perhaps you feel misunderstood, or set apart by a secret, or by experiences that makes you different from the people around you. Maybe you believe that something that you did in the past simply cannot be forgiven or that you have been harmed and cannot be healed. Perhaps just the busyness of your life, or the loneliness of it, makes real connection with another person impossible. Or maybe you just feel that you are missing something that others have, that you are cut off from God.

The religious leaders of Jesus’ time see him sharing meals with deplorable, notoriously immoral people, with prostitutes and the tax collectors who collaborate with the Roman army. They often point out that these people haven’t really changed or repented. They wonder if Jesus is incurably naïve. They argue that someone who was from God would have the wisdom to realize how bad these people really are.

In response Jesus tells three stories. One is about a wealthy shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep to find one in the wilderness. “When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices” (Lk. 15). Another is about a woman sweeping the whole house to find a coin and concludes saying, “There is joy in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents.” The last is the story of the Prodigal Son.

In other words Jesus takes our dominant metaphor of a spiritual quest and turns it on its head. Religion is not about seeking God. It is about God’s persistence in finding us. It is about overcoming separation and the joy of reunion.

As a young management consultant one of my closest friends in our Santa Monica office was a young engineer named Walid Iskandar. Walid had grown up in Lebanon during the 1970’s. He was a deeply sincere, thoughtful and fun person with a kind of mischievous smile that I can still see in my mind’s eye.

In college I played rugby with a young freshman who was still trying to figure out the game. His name was Mark Bingham. What these two friends of mine share in common is that they both lost their lives twenty one years ago today when terrorists hijacked their airplanes. In my imagination they are perpetually young. In their last moments, despite the confusion and fear, I believe that God was with them.

In 2018 twelve boys on a soccer team with their coach found themselves trapped deep below the earth in a labyrinthine network of flooded caves in Thailand. As the monsoon season progressed it seemed impossible to nearly everyone in the world that they would be saved. Cave divers from England talked about not being able to see their hands in front of their masks, of wriggling through impossibly narrow spaces again and again unsure of the way out. I will never forget that image of the diver emerging from the water and the amazement on the boys’ faces that they had been found. This joy at being discovered lies at the heart of faith.

2. The second idea that Jesus overturns is that the church exists as a community of holy people set apart from the world. You see this in the conviction that you must first think, say, or do something before you can be acceptable to God.

A few weeks ago a very close friend went to the funeral of her father. At the end of the service, the very last words that the pastor spoke went something like this. “Pat was a great husband, father, lawyer and community leader. But until Pat found Jesus and accepted him in his heart, he was a sinner. Only through the sacrifice of Jesus are we cleansed from sin. No matter how hard you might try to be good, until you have accepted Jesus you are a sinner.”

Jesus completely overturns this picture of how to be in God. It’s not that you become good and then God helps you. Instead, God helps us so that we can be healed. The critics of Jesus feel offended by his connection to the people who break the rules. And Jesus tells them, “these are exactly the people I came to help. God’s love is abundant and overflowing. God will always persist in finding those who are lost.”

The point is that God’s love and mercy always comes before anything else. We do not first accept Jesus in our heart and then become free from sin. The church is not a community of former sinners, but of actively sinning sinners. God does not reward us for living well or believing something, God makes living well and faith itself possible by loving us back to life.

Today we celebrate Congregation Sunday and our calling as a unique people of God. There is no other community quite like this one and I love who we are. But let me be perfectly clear, we have not stopped screwing up. And yet we are loved by God anyway. Although we continue to slip up, we keep encountering God’s grace. This makes us a joyful community of people who against all odds God has found in the way that God is finding all people.

Let me close with a poem by Denise Levertov about this peace that passes all understanding. It’s called “The Avowal.”

“As swimmers dare / to lie face to the sky / and water bears them, / as hawks rest upon air / and air sustains them, / so would I learn to attain / freefall, and float / into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace, / knowing no effort earns / that all-surrounding grace.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

In the face of isolation, everyday cruelty and sudden death what metaphor are we going to live by? Will we choose to see our life as a spiritual quest or as the experience of being found by God? Are we the holy ones or lost souls grateful every day to be found by God. My friends rejoice with me.

Possible Images:

Einstein Window

Karl Schwarzschild

WW I Trench Warfare

Black Hole ?

Drachma coin?

Mark Bingham

Thai Boys’ Soccer Team from the Cave in 2018

1. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 3-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Benjamín Labatut, *When We Cease to Understand the World* tr. Adrian Nathan West (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2020) 34ff. See also “Karl Schwarzschild” on Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Schwarzschild> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. A hypothetical traveler capable of surviving a journey into a black hole would receive light and information from the future. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. And the frightening question asked by this dying man was that if such a thing exists in nature, could there be something like this in the human psyche. Could a concentration of human will cause millions to be exploited so that the laws of human relations no longer held? Schwarzschild feared that this was already happening in Germany. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Denise Levertov, “The Avowal.” <https://allpoetry.com/The-Avowal> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)