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National Presbyterian Church

Following Jesus: "Losing Your Way"

Luke 13:10-17; 22-30, 14:25-33; Deuteronomy 5:12-15

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In our sermons through the winter we're considering the ministry of Jesus through the lens of one of the four accounts we have in the Bible – the account of St. Luke. We come this morning to selections from the 13th and 14th chapters, which I'm tying together under the theme of "losing our way."

I'm not thinking, literally, of course – geographically! . . . Though – I thank God every day for GPS, without which I'd have been lost in DC more times than I can count.

Though even with GPS I confess that sometimes I feel as if I'm lost, and mutter "What are you doing? Where are we going?"

Like the time going South on I-95, where there was a traffic jam (so what else is new?), and we headed off into parts of rural Virginia, only to return to the safety of I-95 some 30 minutes later, having seen twists and turns and roads I'd never seen before, and saving what must have been a full 3-5 minutes!!

So we all know what that's like to get lost, or at least to feel as if we're going round in circles, going nowhere fast "literally." But of course, I'm thinking today primarily about "spiritual lostness." And especially from the point of view of those who believe that God has found them – who live with this good news, at the heart of their being, and yet who then, quietly, at some point in their life, begin to stray again.

In literal terms, it's as if we're moving really well to our destination, but we miss one turn, then two, and hit a one way street (as I've done in Foggy Bottom frequently), and pretty soon we have no clue where we are. And back to spiritual terms, this lostness is not just about WHERE we are, but about WHO we are, and WHOSE we are.

Let me put it like this. The good news of the Gospel is that – through trusting not in ourselves (who we think we are, or what we think we've done) but in the power of Jesus' life, death and resurrection (who he is, and what he has done for us) we can know for certain that we are children of God (*that's WHO we are*) and that (as our constitution says) "In life and in death we belong to God" (*that's WHOSE we are*).

And I trust that you know that: and that if you don't, that you will pray, right now, for God's Spirit to give you this liberating assurance that Jesus came to seek and find the lost, and that by sheer grace you've been found by a God who loves you to the point of death, and knows you by name.

And this is a prayer (*for this assurance that we've been noticed and found by the only one who really matters*) that God will hear. But having said that. It's important to say as well that Jesus is very clear in his teaching – that THE GRACE and KINDNESS and ASSURANCE of God, in no way should rob us of our responsibility to stay close to God; but should actually increase it.

Which, I believe, is the thrust and focal point of Jesus' tough words in Luke 13 and 14, and especially in **Luke 14:25-33**

Listen to these words of Jesus:

²⁵Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them,

1. ²⁶“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.
2. ²⁷Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

An Example of Responsibility FROM BUSINESS

→ ²⁸For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’

An Example of Responsibility FROM BATTLE

³¹Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³²If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.

³³So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Let me add a quick word about *the way Jesus teaches (here – and often) so that we don't get lost in the forcefulness of Jesus' words!*

- Thinking of 14:26 – remember that Jesus loved his mother, even from the cross; he didn't actually hate her! He knew the 10 commandments tell us to honor our parents
- Thinking of 14:27 – while some Christians may feel Jesus wants them to carry a literal cross (as evangelist Arthur Blessitt did in the 1960's and 70's) surely that's not what Jesus intends for all of us.
- Thinking of 14:33 – while some disciples gave all their possessions away, literally, the fact is: many of Jesus' disciples retained their possessions and resources, precisely so they could support Jesus and his ministry -- for the long haul (see Luke 8:3).

So, we're not meant to read these words literally. BUT that's not to downplay them. Because we are meant to read them seriously: indeed, with deadly seriousness. Being a Christian, a follower of Jesus (Jesus is saying!), must be to us every bit as serious as being in business or going to war. You need a business plan; a battle plan; you need to probe beneath the surface and examine every area of life:

Your loves; your commitments; your values; your ties to family and those closest to you; your life's goals and ambitions; your money and possessions.

Because to be a child of God is to belong **not** to ourselves **but to** our faithful Savior . . . hook, line and sinker. And we must be willing to bring every part of our life under his gaze and reign. He is to be our GPS in every twist and turn, OR . . . we'll lose our way, and begin to feel lost again. And that's the last thing Jesus wants for us!

So Jesus' teaching is deliberately TOUGH. It's tough love, not soft love! And we need to work to remember that he's for us; not against us.

I remember meeting a professor at the University of Kentucky some years ago -- and I asked him *what he taught*.

He said, "Business Ethics." And then he added: "In the context of family relationships."

I said, "what do you mean?"

He said, "Well in business, there's what we ought to do *from a business perspective*; the right business approach and strategy. But then there's *the real world* in which all those decisions are impacted, and at times corrupted, not only by the dilemmas and problems of the business itself, but by what's going on in your family or personal life

- * The happiness or unhappiness of your spouse or children
- * The affair on the side, the divorce, the death
- * The care of parents,
- * Or medical or financial issues of one kind or another

So in business ethics, you or someone in your organization has, at the least, to be aware of the power and impact of these *seemingly irrelevant or peripheral private matters overflowing into in all kinds of areas in your public or professional life, or you'll end up on the wrong side of the law OR in a business that fails – YOU'LL GET LOST.*

And this is true in the spiritual life as well, where the battle to stay on course and not lose our way can be every bit as subtle and pernicious as in the secular world – or on the road in DC or I-95!

Which brings us to the two stories in Luke 13 that we read earlier.

- One about "Biblical Correctness"
- and the Other about "Theological Correctness."

Both of these are important in the spiritual life: I hope you know your Bible; and wrestle with profound theological questions. But what we learn from Jesus in our stories today is that even here – even staying within the framework of faith – if we are not careful, we can lose our way.

So in the first story (Luke 13:10-21)

Jesus has been invited to speak in a synagogue somewhere (*we don't know where*), presumably by the leader of the synagogue. Maybe the man has an interest in Jesus. Maybe he's doing it against his will – pressured by the congregation. And when Jesus comes *he doesn't just preach and teach*. But when a woman appears who's been crippled for 18 years, *Jesus heals her* right in front of everyone's eyes. Which should have led to a round of applause and a few hallelujahs (even if the folks were Presbyterians!).

BUT Instead of being happy or elated, the synagogue leader is "indignant" (this is a mixture of anger and sneering; an air of superiority in his demeanor), and he immediately pulls out his "ace" – his knowledge of Scripture, to tell the crowd and Jesus that Jesus is breaking one of the Ten Commandments – the Law about keeping the Sabbath Day holy, as a day to be set apart for God.

He kept saying (as if he couldn't stop himself) to the crowd,
"There are six days on which work ought to be done;
come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

It's as if he's caught Jesus in a trap; caught Jesus soft-peddalling God's word.

But Jesus will have none of it. He decides *not to be a shrinking violet*. For Jesus, the purpose of Scripture

- Isn't to prove that WE're right -- and others are wrong

- It's NOT a hammer to be used to thump people over the head and to catch people out and blame them when they mess up.

But it's a Word from God to help us grow in our ability to live with God and others: TO LOVE! And this is true ESPECIALLY of the very commandment Jesus is accused of breaking – the commandment about the Sabbath! And the Synagogue Leader misses it. He misses not only the purpose of Scripture as a whole, but the purpose of the commandment he refers to.

Listen to the commandment in Deuteronomy 5 (In the Bible, there's also a version in Exodus 20):

¹²Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. ¹³Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

¹⁴But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work

AND that's as far as the leader of the synagogue got . . . but then the commandment continues *with a rationale* . . .

You shall not do any work . . . you,

-- or your son or your daughter (*your family*)

-- or your male or female slave (*those who work for you*)

-- or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, (*your animals*)

-- or the resident alien in your towns, (*the people with no legal protection: powerless people legal and illegal*) so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.

Do you hear it? . . . that this Commandment is not only a piece of religious law, but it's also *social legislation* that tells us that we are to care for all kinds of people, especially powerless people, and even our animals, ALL created and loved by God.

And so Jesus lets the man know that in using Scripture merely as a weapon, a tool to be "one up" on others, to prove we're right and others are not up to snuff, he's not only misread and misunderstood the text, BUT he's missed the point of God's book!

- He's still religious but he's lost his way with GOD!
- He's not on the path that God intended.

It's tricky. It's pernicious. It's diabolical. We need to be on our guard! You can even be religious, seeking to be "Biblical," and stray from God.

And Jesus makes the same kind of point again -- in the second story as well.

A man comes to Jesus with a fascinating theological question

^{13:22}Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching, as he made his way to Jerusalem.

²³and Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?"

Interesting question. The kind of question that many of our Presbyterian forbears loved to play around with, with endless speculations about predestination and free will, and so forth. But let me be clear: nothing wrong with the question in and of itself. In fact, it's important that we use our minds to think through big issues – social, political, theological, and more. BUT when the questions *become twisted* – a matter of pure speculation, a sort of one up-man-ship, or even a badge to show you belong to the right group

And lots of people tried to do this with Jesus, whether the question was:

- *Who is my Neighbor?(Luke 10:29)*

- *Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?(Luke 20:22)*
- *If you marry a number of times – who will your spouse be in heaven?(Luke 20:35-36)*
- OR NOW: “*Will those who are saved be few?*”

When the questions become twisted, Jesus has no time for them. . . and in this case (as in Luke 10 and 20), he refuses to answer the question directly. Instead, he simply says,

- “Stop focusing on *others*
- Stop focusing on *endless speculation* – a question we can never resolve
- and focus on yourself: what *YOU* need to do to make sure *you* are close to God, within God’s kingdom.

Listen again . . .

²³Someone asked him, “Lord, will only a few be saved?”

He said to them, ²⁴“YOU Strive (agonize) to enter through the narrow door;

In effect, Jesus is saying that the issue YOU need to deal with is NOT about “them” or “those” BUT about YOU! In other words, even the “big questions” can take us off course, whether theological or social or whatever: distracting us from *what we ourselves need to be doing* – right now.

Think, for example, about the unresolvable conundrum of “Justice for All”

I’m in favor of it? Aren’t you? But how?!

When I was a pastor in Lexington, Kentucky, along with a good friend, an African American Pastor, Joe Owens. We were invited to establish what’s called a Faith-Based Community Organization [The organization is called BUILD – use your search engine with “BUILD Lexington”]. In this community organization we mobilized about a thousand residents (now up to 1500 – the biggest inter-racial gatherings the city has ever seen) a few times each year across racial and economic lines to deal with community issues of unfairness or injustice.

One of the GREAT principles of community organizing is to take *unresolvable large and controversial issues that only end up dividing communities, and break them down into smaller, manageable chunks* that people from different backgrounds – racial, economic, political – can all agree are real and important problems, and for which there’s some sort of practical solution or improvement (usually not a fix for the whole thing; but a start). When you think this way about “doing justice,” you don’t end up grand-standing or demonizing your opponents; you don’t scream about the huge unresolvable issues in generalities. But instead, you take small practical steps in the right direction to wipe out the scars, one by one, that dehumanize the city.

Like when we learned of a problem with the city bus service schedule (*not about who sat where on the bus, but still a “bus issue!”*).

If I remember correctly, the bus service stopped about 30 minutes before the shift changed at the Medical center (a significant employer: the medical center served all of eastern Kentucky). This left significant numbers of minimum wage workers with no transportation to get home *WITHOUT GREAT EXPENSE (before Uber and Lyft!)*.

So – we put together a team from churches across the city to work with the transportation department of the city, and with the Society for Human Resources Management, to change

the bus schedule. No easy thing to do – but once done, a small steps, playing our part together with others we'd barely met before, to bring the unresolvable and huge conundrum of injustice down to earth, for some people, where we could.

How easy it is – teaches Jesus -- to get lost along the way, caught up in unresolvable dilemmas that seem so important; or in attempts to be correct even in important religious matters of Bible and theology; or in other matters, perhaps relating to family or business or money.

- All of these have their time and place when they are good and right –*which is why this issue is so – devilish!*
- But all of these, too, if we are not profoundly careful, can inadvertently throw us off track, and lead us away from the very Jesus, who seeks us, and finds us, and knows far better than we do, where the best path for our lives lies.

Listen to his voice today, and talk to him today.

He is the one who has found you.

Ask him

- to make you aware of all those possible dead-end side roads that will get you lost
- and to keep you close to him, on his path. Always.

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