

# Desolation

## Proper 24C – September 14, 2025

I was looking forward to preaching today, because I have fond memories of the first time I encountered these texts: September 16, 2001, the Sunday after 9/11. It is one of the sermons I remember vividly. It affected me deeply. In the middle of all that despair the image I could see most clearly was God the poor woman searching for one of her lost coins, the remnant of her paltry dowry perhaps. Looking everywhere, turning the little house upside down to find it. And I could see God among the searchers at the two towers, or the Pentagon, scraping through the rubble desperately hoping against hope for a sign of life. God searching for a sign of life in the despair the world was feeling. God searching for a path to peace.

I was hoping to recapture that feeling today. But you can never go back; God never says the same thing in the same way. This week, in this season of Creation, I found myself asking Who is Christ searching for?

The gospel of Luke shows Jesus stirring things up, as usual. He made the religious leaders grumble and complain because of the company he kept – tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus was friendly with Pharisees and other people generally thought of as good. Other gospel stories show him eating with Pharisees and behaving in a friendly way. In fact, if you listen to the two little stories he told, you could think of them as the 99 sheep who didn't get lost, or the 9 coins still on the woman's bridal headdress. They were no less valued than the missing sheep or the lost coin – they just caused a lot less trouble.

Traditionally we think of the lost sheep as being the needy and homeless. Catholic liberation theologians talk about the preferential option for the poor, and see God in the Bible and in the life of Jesus as reaching out particularly for them. I agree, and 99% of the time that's what I'm going to talk about too.

But today I see Jesus as being more concerned with tax collectors and sinners – with people who were rich and powerful enough to invite the current superstar for dinner.

Tax collectors were an interesting bunch. The Romans didn't have the CRA to collect their taxes. They farmed the job out to friends of influential people. They were told to get a certain amount out of the people, no questions asked about how. Their methods were not all that nice, and they generally ended up pretty well-off themselves. In Judea they could have been Jews or any of the other nationalities that you would find around there. And if they were Jews they were probably not all that careful about following the Law of Moses. That was the sort of person Jesus hung out with. Matthew, who gave us the first gospel, is said to have been a tax collector.

Today who are the ones our scribes and Pharisees think we shouldn't welcome and eat with? Who would make the angels of God rejoice if they allowed themselves to be found? Who are the tax collectors and sinners Jesus is trying to get through to? Who are the ones we nice religious people don't want him to search for?

In my case the answer surprised me. It hit me with the news about Charlie Kirk's murder.

When I heard that that scumbag (in my humble opinion) was dead I found myself cheering. He preached everything I hate about ultra-conservatives. He was pro-gun, anti-abortion, anti-gay and trans; he thought women should stay home and obey their husbands – that sort of thing. He taught young men to hate, and he was killed by one who learned to hate him. And I fell into the trap of hate, too.

I want to go back to the tough readings from the Old Testament we heard today. The earth in Jeremiah's time was scorched and dead because of the behaviour of the king of Judah, who had put his own power and wealth ahead of his duty to God and his people. He broke a treaty he had made with Babylon, and the Babylonians killed him and carried the elite of Judah into captivity. Ten years later the remaining population rebelled against Babylon and were utterly crushed. Their temple was destroyed, and their land turned into wasteland. Jeremiah says -

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;  
and to the heavens, and they had no light

...

I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,  
and all the birds of the air had fled.

I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,  
and all its cities were laid in ruins.

And I see the wasteland that was Gaza, or the cities of Ukraine. And the drought that has affected most of Canada this year, and the torrential floods that are destroying other parts of the world as our climate changes.

Who is responsible for all this? Listen to the psalmist:

Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God."  
They are corrupt; they do abominable deeds,

...

[they] eat up my people as they eat bread.

I could plug the names of some world leaders in there. The greed, hatred and ignorance of a discouraging number of powerful men is doing unspeakable things to our earth and its little ones – the birds, the flowers, the animals, and the ordinary people.

These leaders are among the lost sheep, the lost coin that Jesus is seeking.

Can you imagine the cheering in heaven if Vladimir Putin or Donald Trump allowed themselves to be found by our loving God?

I can't imagine that happening, although it is one of the things I pray for daily.

Is there no good news here?

Well, there's Paul remembering the mercy he experienced:

I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, a man of violence. But I received mercy,... and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

I don't know if we can expect our corrupt and violent world leaders to be overcome by the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus, although it never hurts to ask. But we can hope for ourselves.

So what can I do? Those of us who are in a way among the 99 sheep and 9 coins – who have allowed Jesus to find us?

We can speak out when we hear hate preached, but that's scary and I for one don't feel brave or smart enough to do that effectively.

Better would be simply to live our lives as we have been taught, responding to the love of God by loving our neighbour as ourselves, without judgement or reserve. Follow the principles of our food bank: accept people as they are and serve them as best we can.

Try to get away from the them-and-us divisions that are tearing our world apart. Our church community has learned over the past year how to overcome divisions and accept each other for what we are. We need to model that for the rest of the world.

Jesus Christ welcomes sinners and invites us to his table. We need to do the same.