

Sermon for September 11, 2016
God's Work Our Hands Sunday

Most of us are searching for something—lost keys, a good job, a new home, good ideas, success, dreams and the list goes on. The Gospel reading for today includes two of Jesus' stories about searching for what is lost—a lost coin and a lost sheep. Like the shepherd and the widow, rescue workers famously on 9/11 and less famously on every other day sought out with urgent determination those who were lost, hurting or in need—often at great peril to themselves.

But perhaps we, too, are searching for answers with equal desperation—answers about why bad things happen in our world, how we might find forgiveness in the wake of tragedy, what new life looks like after the death of a loved one, or when we might find peace between nations. We are searching for answers about God and how to live out our faith. Perhaps in preparation for today we have searched in our communities and around the world for places in need where we might use our hands for God's work. We likely found more need than a day of service can meet.

In the first reading from Exodus, Moses is faced with God's anger at the people's disobedience. He undertakes his own desperate search to find some way to intervene on their behalf. What he finds is not despair, but God's faithfulness in response to wandering and rebellion, and the promise that was made to Abraham and his descendants forever to bless them and make them a blessing to others. The people's hands are stained, but Moses points back to the work God promised to do for them and through them.

In the second reading, Paul searches his own story for some wisdom to share with Timothy. He had once been lost in what he thought was religious zeal but was really persecution of others. His hands had been used to threaten and imprison others, but God transformed them for a new purpose. In searching his story for some reason for that transformation he finds only God's abundant mercy in the call to serve God as a messenger of the good news.

In our frantic search for answers, in the dangerous search that first responders sometimes face, and in our search for a way to help in a world of need, we often discover that we are, like

the Israelites and Paul, the ones who have been lost. Whether aware of our distress like the missing sheep or blissfully unaware like the missing coin, we are the ones sought out by God, who does not stop looking until we are found.

We are undoubtedly called to the difficult work of searching out the lost, and in doing so we discover much about God. But it is in our having been forever found through the promises of baptism that we discover the grace of God, without which we could not do the seeking work to which we have been called. Like Moses and Paul, we can go back to our own histories and point to the moments when God has unquestioningly promised us blessing and hope and salvation, despite our failings. We offer our imperfect hands and our whole selves in service to God and neighbor, seeking justice, peace, and hope. But it is God's work to seek us out and claim us as children of God. When our searching fails to turn up what we seek or when we find deeper pain and need than we can handle, we have a God who through baptism has already found us and all that has been lost.