

“Not Lost, Just Found”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
VI Easter – 25 May 2014
Acts 17:22-31; I Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

“I’ve looked everywhere for it, and I just can’t find it!” No matter how big of a neat freak you may be, with a place for everything and everything in its place, almost everyone from time to time loses something, like your keys or the TV remote. We are blessed, or perhaps cursed, with such an abundance of stuff that it’s hard to keep track of each little item. For me, it’s my glasses that most often go missing.

I tend to take them off when I read, because I’m near-sighted. A book eighteen inches under my nose or a computer monitor, I can see better without my glasses. It’s when I stand up and wander off to do this, that, or the other that I get into trouble, because there’s a little bit of the absent-minded professor in me. So when I need my glasses to drive the car or whatever, I frequently forget where I last had them, and without them, it’s hard to see well enough to find them on the kitchen table or the paper-strewn desk or, where I once discovered them, in the freezer. Don’t ask, because honestly, I have no idea how they got there.

The same can be true of God. No matter how much we need God, no matter how faithful we strive to be, sometimes God seems to go missing. It’s a strange thing, because we know that God can be everywhere all at once, and usually it’s very easy to see God present in the beauty of creation and in other people and in those quiet moments of reflection, like worship, that help us slow down enough to savor the sight, sound, and feeling of the God we love and who loves us so eagerly. Yet from time to time, we suffer a sense of loss, as if God has somehow vanished, as Jesus did at supper with the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

In these moments, our frustration mounts, because we know God is around here somewhere, but we can't quite recall exactly where we saw Him last, like a fugitive pair of glasses or a misplaced set of keys. We aren't sure what to do or where to look. Some people are on a constant quest to locate God, so much so that a term has been coined for this clan. We call them "seekers," and we use that word to denote people who hop about sampling different spiritual experiences, all in the hope that a glimmer of God might be found in some of them.

However, in a way, all of us are seekers. Paul makes that claim in The Acts of the Apostles, where he suggests that people are made "to search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him – though indeed he is not far from each of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being.'" In other words, we often hunt for God here, there, and everywhere, when in fact God is located elsewhere, in the last place we might think to look, nestled down deep inside us. Jesus says the same thing about "the Spirit of truth." "You know him, because he abides in you, and he will be in you." "You will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."

At one level, we accept this to be true, because how could we deny it? Jesus emphasized God's intimacy with us throughout his public ministry, and Paul consistently followed Jesus' lead in his own writings. God cannot be confined to a *sancta sanctorum*. God is simply too big to fit in any container we might design for Him. God is too free to be limited to a specific place. Rather God dwells wherever He chooses, and God chooses us.

That's a comforting, uplifting thought, but there are times when we find it hard to believe. Why would God want to abide in me? We wonder. I'm not special, except for my flaws and faults, which truly are exceptional and which would, if anything, disqualify me from serving as an abode where God would want to abide. How easy it is to forget that it has nothing

to do with our deserving. Instead, God makes us worthy by His indwelling Spirit that finds a home within us.

Yet even if we accept this on faith, we sometimes suffer a real sense of God's absence. We look inward only to find that nobody's home. Terrible as that experience is, though, it's a common one that has more to do with our awareness and perception than where God actually is. The world is full of distractions, both benign and malignant, that make us forgetful of God; distractions that blur our sight so much we cannot perceive God's presence abiding in us. But God is there, lurking within, waiting to be rediscovered to our joy and to God's glory.

Of course, even when we embrace the truth of scripture and overcome our sense of shame to realize that our worthiness is not a precondition of God's inhabitation, we can still feel reluctant to acknowledge the fact that God lives within us, because hosting God in our hearts bears certain implications. Just as a house guest places a degree of obligation upon us, God dwelling within us requires a measure of hospitality that can be inconvenient. The only real difference is that a house guest comes and goes, while God plans to stick around for the long haul.

God living inside us calls us to follow a certain way of life. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Now we are sadly accustomed to hearing, "If you love me," in a manipulative way, as in "If you love me, you will or won't do this, that, or the other." But that's not what Jesus has in mind. Instead, if we love Jesus, keeping his commandments comes naturally to us, because the principal commandment of Jesus is love. It can be difficult to know what the loving thing to do is sometimes, but scripture gives us guidance. And since scripture cannot cover every situation life throws at us, God has also given us prayer and a loving community to aid in our discernment.

The trouble is that the loving thing to do can hurt. The loving thing can require sacrifice. That's why Peter wrote, "even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all." The suffering we endure for the sake of unselfish love is part and parcel of what it means for God to dwell within us. Just as Jesus suffered to be here for us, so we sometimes suffer to be here for Jesus and for others who need God's healing, strengthening love. The good news is that we will survive the pain, just as Jesus did, and experience a renewal of life, a foretaste of the resurrection Jesus has promised, that will make it more than worthwhile.

So the next time you go searching for your keys or glasses or the TV remote, you're on your own. But the next time you go looking for God and can't seem to find Him, take a quiet moment and a deep breath and peer deep within yourself, and know in your bones that God has made Himself at home, that love courses in your veins with every heartbeat, and that the ache of faithfulness is indeed a blessing to be treasured. Amen.