

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee WI
September 15, 2019 — Kick-Off Sunday

If you were lucky enough to grow up in a neighborhood with lots of kids, you may have experienced the joys of after-dinner games. Imagine a summer evening, the older kids dividing the younger kids into teams for a game of capture the flag, or touch football, or maybe neighborhood-wide hide and seek. I have fond memories of being with friends as the sun is setting after dinner running wild through backyards playing games that seemed like they would last forever, or at least until a parent called you in and broke the spell.

One of my earliest memories is being four or five and playing with the older kids. But here's where the memory becomes less halcyon and gets a little weird. I'm not sure if it was the invention of an older kid or maybe someone had learned a game at camp, but for one whole summer in the early 80s, the neighborhood kids on my block were playing a game called Bloody Murder. Where were the adults, you might ask? I honestly don't know. But Bloody Murder is kind of a riff on Hide and Seek. One person is it and counts to 100 at a tree, which is the base. Everyone else goes and hides. The person who is it runs around and tries to discover where everyone else is hidden. The first person who is discovered yells at the very top of her lungs, "BLOODY MURDER" which is the cue for everyone to run to the base, while the person who is IT tries to tag you. The result, basically, is that all the kids on the block spend most of the summer evening hours screaming like they're being killed and spooking very confused neighbors.

I always liked Bloody Murder because it was an inversion of Hide and Seek — it took the typical and expected game and turned it on its head to create something new. This is, of course, the way a parable works. It's not a story, exactly. It's an inversion of expectation — a way to teach us that what we might think about the nature of God is not quite right and needs to be interrupted.

In our world, we might be forgiven for expecting a God to be loud, violent, armed, and allied with the powerful majority. But Jesus, teaching in the Gospel of Luke this morning, flips that expectation. Is God like the general of a heavenly army, like the disciples might have expected? No. God is instead like a shepherd who is willing to risk life and limb for the safety of one sheep.

Is God like the muscle-bound and lightning crowned Zeus on Mt. Olympus? No. God is like a woman who is searching through the house, looking for one lost coin. Why we don't have stained glass about this, I'll never know. The nature of God is to seek out that which is lost and then rejoice at its finding.

And let me tell you: sometimes I think we are the woman, and sometimes I think we're the coin. How many times have you found yourself in this life seeking for something precious — be it a deeper relationship with God or with one another, a way to bring justice into our world, or maybe words for a prayer you don't even know you need to say. Those days, I feel like the woman in the story.

But sometimes I think I'm the coin — precious but lost and just waiting for someone to search me out. Surely we have all had times in our lives when we felt cast aside or stuck under a couch cushion. Maybe a difficult time at work or with family; or maybe a bout of depression or fatigue. Imagine at that time that there was a celestial woman seeking you out with every ounce of her resources.

And that, really, is the Gospel. You are being sought after by a relentless and motivated God. Over and over, no matter how many times you end up lost. That wonderful and tenacious woman is not at all interested in letting you go and will rejoice and thank all the angels in heaven when you are found.

Imagine all that, for little ol' you. This heavenly lady is not interested in your resume, your stock portfolio, your marital status, your IQ, your church affiliation, nor your BMI. Instead, this woman is interested that you exist in this world and will keep seeking you until the last breath that you take and then after.

That is why Christians are strong, and that is why they can go into the world — into the prisons, slums, hospitals, and war zones to give succor to the powerless. Christians are powerful because they know, in their bones, how precious they are to this ever-seeking God.

I'm afraid that our culture has a tendency to treat some people as disposable — as things. Maybe someone doesn't have access to the halls of power, no access to money, no access to fame or rooms where decisions are made. Sometimes we can decide that person isn't worth anything — they roam our streets like ghosts or half people. But just because we can abandon our fellows doesn't mean that God is capable of the same. Those lost people are that much more precious to God, which should give us some very good information about where our time and money and energy should be spent. Just as you have been found, go find someone else who is lost.

In a way, that's what we celebrate on this Kick Off Sunday. It's great that the choir is back and that Sunday School is starting — but really, we're celebrating that we have been found and gathered together into one Church by a benevolent God who seeks after us for Her own joy. We have been found, my friends, and no one even had to scream Bloody Murder. Rejoice with the angels that we are found, and let's go find all the others who are discarded, or alone, or lost. Amen.