



St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

September 14, 2025; Proper 19C:

[Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28, 1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10](#)

When I was in Maine over Labor Day weekend, I had a chance to talk with a former parishioner and friend about another former parishioner and friend who recently died. Though the woman who died and I were close, we had a bit of a rocky relationship. She was from an aristocratic family on the Main Line in Philadelphia. Well educated and well healed, she – despite having taken more pastoral care time than most, having been thanked regularly, and having been put in charge of several groups and ministries – never felt like she received the respect or attention that she and her lineage deserved. She rarely held back her feelings of disappointment in me or the church. I remember one day – during the time when the faith communities were deeply involved in the fight for marriage equality, when Maine had become an immigrant relocation center and we were seeing 300 asylum seekers and refugees at our pantries every Tuesday and Thursday, and when the number of people fed in our weekend soup kitchen had jumped from around 200 to more than 1000 a week – she stomped into my office, said, “If I was gay, an immigrant, or poor, you might pay more attention to me” and then stomped out.

When I reflect on that moment, two scriptures come to mind. The first was the father's words to the older son who was mad at the attention the younger brother received in the story of the Prodigal Son: “Yes, I love you. Everything I have is yours. Right now, however, we need to celebrate that the one who was lost has come home.” Looking back, I wish I had told that woman that I loved her and that almost everything we did in that church was for her and people like her but that these other people were in trouble and needed our help right now. The second scripture that came to mind was the gospel passage we just heard about the lost sheep and the lost coin. Arguing with her in my head, I kept asking myself, isn't a shepherd's job to periodically leave the 99 who are doing well and focus on the one who is lost? Of course, what I missed in this metaphor was that despite all her trappings, she was telling me that she was lost herself. Despite all her outward successes, inside she was the prodigal son, longing for acceptance and looking for love. I regret that I wasn't able to talk with her about these things before she died. I hope and pray that she is in a place where the pain she carried so deeply has been taken away, where she has found the love and healing that she had been looking for all along.

You all know that I have a side ministry volunteering as a chaplain for the Coast Guard, something I see as an extension of the outreach of St. Luke's, of the Diocese, and of the Episcopal Church. The summer schedule at St. Luke's and East Hampton has been so full that, with the exception of a few ceremonies, I haven't done much of that ministry over the past few months. I was able, however, to say yes to a short-term request last week and will be leaving after church today to spend three days at sea with a cutter whose crew has been facing a series of complex and

challenging events and asked for chaplain support. (I will be back in the office on Thursday.) When I go on a ship like that, I meet with the command and crew, offer devotions, provide one on one support and if needed give classes and briefs. The most important work, however, is a ministry of presence, the informal contacts made while eating on the mess deck, hanging out on the helicopter deck, or the bridge or even the officer's wardroom. I may be the only auxiliary and the chaplain they interact with in their career. I may be the only Christian - and Episcopalian - they have ever met. My job is not to make small talk with people who are chatting or doing things together. My job is to look for that one person who has separated him or herself from the group, the one who is quiet, the one who is suffering, the one who is alone. I need to remember that, like when I go to coffee hour here at St. Luke's or any number of fundraisers or events around town, I am on duty. As nice as it is to go to those things and catch up and spend time with people I know, my role is to talk to people I don't. Your role, my friends, is the same. At coffee hour or other events like that, you are on duty. You may be the first Christian someone has ever met. You may be the only Jesus they ever see. You may be the only one all week long who speaks to them, says hello, asks how they are and actually listens..

We live in difficult times. The world described in our reading from Jeremiah sounds disturbingly similar to our own. I mention my service as a chaplain. I have many ribbons and awards that I proudly wear. I have a pin from the Department of Homeland Security that I do not. What is going on in our country is so contrary to my faith and core beliefs that there have been several times when I have thought of resigning my position. Today's parable keeps me there. That one lost sheep keeps me in. If I help one person better become part of the team and fulfill his or her mission, I will help the whole ship. If I stop one person from spiraling down and committing suicide, self-medicating, or ending their marriage or ruining their life, all my service has been worthwhile. If with the smallest of actions, you or I can introduce one person to an inclusive, non-judgmental, reason-respecting Christianity that combines ancient practices with modern thought, we will change the future of the church. If with a kind word, a smile, a listening ear, one of us plants a seed that stops someone from pulling out a gun, doing an act of political violence or encouraging others to do the same, we will not only save lives but bring healing and hope to the world in which we live.

People have asked me if the church condemns political violence. Of course the church condemns violence. Every week we pray for the end of violence and hate. Ending these things, however, will require more than thoughts and prayers. It will require each of us to put our faith in action on the largest of levels - and the smallest as well.

This is tough stuff. Sometimes, like that woman from my former parish, the sheep that is lost, the person most in need of love, is the one who looks like he or she has it all together. Finding that person, reaching out to him or her, can make all the difference. That's what Jesus is asking us - that's what Jesus is asking you - to do today.