

Sermon September 14, 2025

Bishop Karen Oliveto

"As we search for responses to ongoing violence in our midst, let us begin by starting within ourselves:

God, enhance in us a capacity to see when and where we are using words that harm another, that denies that we are kin as your beloved children. May our words always seek to build up, even when they challenge and confront. Let us be vigilant as we confront violence, that we not, in turn, do violence. We are not sure how we move out of this deep polarization and penchant for violence that has gripped our country. But we know if we want change, let it start with us. Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with us."

Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Lost and Found

Today we remember how much God loves us. God loves us so much to seek us out when we are lost... like a woman desperately scrabbling on the floor looking for a little coin of a shepherd going into the brambles to rescue a little lost sheep. This week was a tough one for many people and we need this sacred reminder of God's active love. As our country reels from the aftermath of Charlie Kirk's murder on the same day as another school shooting, our hearts break. Our anxiety increases and bomb threats shut down historically black colleges in multiple states and people respond to their pain with rage and retribution. We feel lost and alone. We long to feel God's sacred arms around us and that sweet voice whisper: "Don't worry-I've got you!"

This week was also a time of painful memories. For all of us over a certain age, we remember a day of destruction and death, when the world changed forever. In some ways, it feels as if it happened yesterday, not 24 years ago last Thursday. We remember the vivid blue sky of a September morn. We remember when we heard of the first plane that hit the towers... many of us thought "surely it was an accident." And moved on through our morning activities. We remember when we heard of the next plane... and the Pentagon... and the missing plane that eventually was brought down by the passengers, desperate to save others lives. We remember the eerie silence, as every plane in the country was grounded. We remember our own mental check list, making sure that loved ones were safe. We remember the constant coverage, as a nation moved from denial to rage to action. We remember the tragic stories of the victims and courageous acts of the survivors. We remember that moment when we realized that the world as we knew it was changed forever.

I remember holding my sleeping baby that day, as I watched the images on my tv wash over me. I was terrified for my brother, who had an office in the World Trade Center. Thankfully, he worked out of DC that day and was safe. As I watch the images on my TV screen, I was so thankful that Meg was too young to understand what was happening. But, now I see that as a mixed

blessing because she and (Sylvia and Annika and Cannon) will never know what the world was like then... when we felt like the ground we walked on... the buildings we worked in, were safe. We knew that we could do unspeakable things to each other, but no one thought that an outside enemy would dare to attack us. Many of us had no idea that there was an enemy that hated us so much. In a Sept. 10th world the world made sense; in a Sept. 11th world, we lost our footing. How can God speak in a world that is falling apart?

And here we are, more than two decades later, and we are still experiencing the fallout from that day. The fears and the things that divide us from our neighbor have only become more powerful in the aftermath of that day of terror. We see that in the escalating number of school shootings and increased political violence that impacts people on both sides of the aisle.

God wants so much more for all of us.

Today we learn a little more about who God is and what God wants:

- ♥ God is like a shepherd, desperately searching for the one sheep out of a hundred who is lost
- ♥ God is like a woman searching for a lost coin, because nothing is too insignificant or valueless.
- ♥ God chose to leave some distant place in the clouds and vivid blue sky to live right here as one of us... to feel the same grief... to know the searing pain that can rip us apart... to know the fear of being truly lost and joy of being found.

Our God speaks to us today and everyday!

When the World Trade Center buildings collapsed, early responders found a creative miracle in their midst. In the debris was an intact cross beam jutting up towards the sky... the perfect shape of a cross in the midst of desolation. A grief-exhausted excavator found it on Sept. 13, 2001, two days after the terrorist attacks. A few days later, he spoke to a Franciscan priest named Father Brian Jordan, who was blessing the remains at Ground Zero.

"Father, you want to see God's House?" he asked. "Look over there."

"Oh my God," Father Brian said. "I see it."

That cross became a source of healing and blessing for those who continued to work and pray at ground zero and stands today at the 9/11 memorial. A reminder in a Good Friday world of the hope found God's creating, loving presence

Sometimes we are lost but God always promises to seek us out until we are found and restored. That is the covenantal promises that keep us going. Promises that we are as vital to the flock even when we get lost. Promises that we are not valueless or insignificant. Promises that God will travel with us during the darkest moments of our lives and celebrate with us in moments of joy. God is closer than our beating heart. Amen