



## Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon, the Rev. Dr. David T. Gortner

Sept. 14, 2025

*Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28*

*Psalm 14*

*1 Timothy 1:12-17*

*Luke 15:1-10*

Oh Christ our God, we need you near. In the deep darkness that has descended on our nation, come to us with your lifegiving light. You came into the world to save sinners and to seek those who are lost. Guide our minds, stir our hearts, and lift our wills to follow you where you lead. Help us be light, see light, and bring light. Speak to us, we pray. Amen.

Friends, this week has been gripping and horrifying for our nation and particularly in this Mountain West region of our country, in the wake of the public murder of Charlie Kirk in Utah and the murder of Matthew Silverstone and another teenager at Evergreen High School in Colorado. And yet, it is also another week in America, another week that we are in danger of growing accustomed to, of another murder of a political figure, another mass shooting at a school or church or park or store or public event. More dead. More blood. And ongoing easy ways to kill. All of this in a hothouse of increasing angry and scornful political rhetoric that we are taking into our own speech and thoughts about the supposed enemy that we now regard as subhuman, and so we hear the threatening calls for civil war. This is what we are becoming now, what we are making ourselves into. We are not yet there, and there is time to turn around, to repent and renounce “the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God” (Book of Common Prayer, p. 302). But each one of us has felt a sense of horror, incredible sadness, and bleak despair when we see these streams of murder and the rising tide of violent speech in this our America. We can see with the prophet Jeremiah the bleak landscape of a land scorched and withered.

*I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light.*

*I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro.*

*I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled (Jer. 4:24-27a).*

How many of you have felt that kind of encroaching emptiness, that possibility of everything crumbling?

Twice this week since September 11<sup>th</sup>, I have had people in stores and public gatherings cry out their despair, anger, uncertainty, and alarm. Some of their speech was reciting echoes of the rage machines that seize air time on social media and get air time on public media. Some of their speech was peppered with ideas about the End Times and how things are supposed to get worse before Christ returns, and about how life on this earth is trial and turmoil before we cross the gateway to heaven. I tried to bring some quieting to the storm of their minds and hearts, by offering some other visions. “It has been incredibly dark and bleak before in other times, even worse – our own Civil War, the killings in the Chinese “Cultural Revolution,” the Black Plague. They all seemed like the End Times.” “Remember, this is God’s creation, and God made it good. We are made in the image of God. That is the starting point and the basis of everything.”

Do not despair. Change is possible. Turning is possible. Conversion is possible. The lost can be found and brought home. The persecutor and the violent can be redeemed and become beacons of light. The persecuted and the victimized can be strengthened and find new life again, and let light break through.

“This saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15). Christ Jesus came into the world to save us all – every one of us, each of us a sinner caught in the evils of the world and infecting our own hearts, souls, minds and wills.

Christ Jesus, God incarnate, God's Word made flesh, came to open the arms of love to all of us who are lost, whether we admit our lostness or not – even in arms extended wide and nailed by our cruelty to a cross. “Love your enemies.” This is no small order. And it is the way of God, the way we see and know in Christ. “Seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.” This is the pledge of our baptism, and we are sealed with the very nature of Christ.

“Which one of you, having lost something dear to you, does not search high and low and go after the lost thing until you find it? And when you find it, which of you does not rejoice? And might you not even invite your friends and neighbors to rejoice with you as you share the story?” Jesus offers three examples to drive this home for all of us – the shepherd who goes searching through the brambles and thickets for the lost sheep, the homemaker mom who searches the whole house for the lost valuable coin, and then (next in Luke) the father who yearns for his lost prodigal son to return and then rejoices, opens his arms wide, and throws a great party when the lost son returns. Each time, Jesus ends with “Just so.” “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

And so the mission of God goes on, relentlessly, through the ages, to reconcile every soul, every beloved creature, to God who is their source. God's great project of reconciliation is ongoing, on through the ages and on through as long as it takes, even to the edges of eternity, to bring all creation home – all matter, all spirit, all levels of creation. As it says in II Corinthians, “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” We, as followers of Jesus, are full participants in the reconciling mission of God – as recipients, and also as ambassadors and seekers for who and what is lost.

The nations that Heather and I visited have each had their times of violent and catastrophic turmoil. Spain in the centuries of war and conquest between Christian and Muslim dominions and during the Franco dictatorship. Morocco in embattled changes of dynasties and civil strife in its far southern and northwestern regions. Tunisia in its recent Jasmine Revolution or Arab Spring and centuries previous in the rise of the Ottoman Empire. Italy in the Wars of Italian Unification and the dictatorship of Mussolini. Albania in centuries of struggle under rulership of different nations and then under severe communist regime control. Greece and Turkey at war, and Greece under Nazi occupation. And we know severe points of history for Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands. And across all these countries, Jews suffered at the hands of Christians or were neglected by them, and were tolerated but regarded as lesser citizens by Muslims.

But there have been and still are beacons of light and hope and bold witness to a different way of being, in every nation.

Across the Moroccan border, in the Atlas mountains of Algeria, up in the hills from Medea a Catholic monastery was built in 1843 – the Abbey of Our Lady of Atlas in Tibhirine. For nearly 150 years, Trappist monks shared a life of prayer and service together, offering respectful neighborly care for their nearby Muslim communities. Then, the Algerian civil war broke out between the government and a nationwide Islamist uprising. It is still known as “the dirty war” because of how civilians were targeted. One of the most radical groups, the Armed Islamic Group, had the motto, “no agreement, no truce, no dialogue.” In 1996, these insurrectionists kidnapped seven of the nine monks. Two managed to avoid capture by hiding. The seven captives were killed and beheaded. The Catholic Church was able to retrieve their remains and bury them at the monastery.

The two surviving monks managed to get across the border to the monastery in Fes. They remained in North Africa for the rest of their lives, moving from Fes to help launch a new monastery in Midelt, in the Atlas Mountains just 70 miles from the Algerian border. There, they served the community of Muslims around them and prayed with their new brothers until their death.

We visited the remains of a companion monastery near Azhrou, about 50 miles north. This monastery in Toumliline had an extraordinary but brief history of incredible impact and witness to the love of God. The monks, like their companions in Algeria (and later in Midelt south of them), devoted themselves to prayer and to fostering a community of lovingkindness. They cared for and provided medical services for their Muslim neighbors. They developed and ran a school, teaching the children but out of respect for the Muslim community never trying to convert them. They developed strong and trustworthy relationships with people around them. And they launched an important series of interfaith conferences where leaders from Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and other religions gathered to hear and learn from each other – not to find the easy common ideals they shared, but to listen deeply to their differences in a spirit of respect. Pictures from these gatherings show leaders in conversation with each other, always smiling because of how they were enjoying getting to know each other and learn from each other. Morocco's prior king, when he was crown prince, attended one of these conferences and was deeply moved. He was instrumental in anchoring Morocco's tolerance and respect for different religions in law, even as a devout Muslim. Toumliline was a place where gentle but steady miracles were happening.

Then, in the mid 1960s, due to a loss of funding as the big global powers intensified their Cold War, and as internal strife in Morocco led to tensions for the monks and their regionally managed finances were swindled, the monks were forced into a decision of having to leave the monastery. The buildings fell into disrepair and ruin over the decades, and some buildings were used by local men as meeting places with their mistresses.

In the 2010s, Toumliline reemerged in the minds and memories of people, and the stories were passed on. A Muslim woman we met, Lamia Radi, learned of what the monks of Toumliline had created and how lives were touched, and she was deeply moved. She has since devoted her energies to creating a nonprofit foundation devoted to restoring places of such sacred memory. She met us on the grounds of Toumliline, where she devotes time with young men from nearby villages and towns to cleaning up and restoring the buildings and grounds, with the hope that this can one day again be a gathering place for meaningful interfaith connection and learning.

Lamia's heart has been deeply moved and imagination stirred by the lives of these monks who embodied the love of God shown in Jesus. Lamia shared with me that she met one of the survivor monks from Algeria at the monastery in Midelt. She said that he was often asked how he could possibly return to the Atlas Mountains and to deeply Muslim territory among the Berber people. And she said that he responded that truly believed that following Jesus meant loving even people who had decided to become your enemies, and that returning to ministry in the mountains was to let love win – in his own life, and hopefully in the lives he touched. Lamia, a strong and decisive woman that you just don't mess with, said that she wept and still gets tears in her eyes remembering this monk. Lamia hopes that all the young men who work with her and for restoration of the monastery will learn who these Christians really were, become curious about learning more about other Abrahamic faiths, and thus have experiences that become sturdy defenses against them becoming radicalized and ready to kill others.

This. This is what resurrection looks like. And this is what reconciliation means in action – even across the ages. The heart and soul of such love poured out by these monks for the world around them lives on in the testimonies of those who experienced their loving care and companionship, and those who hear their stories, and those who gathered in rare opportunity of learning from leaders in other religions. The life of Toumliline is being raised again, by a Muslim woman president of a nonprofit, in companionship with a Jewish executive director of another nonprofit, with a Christian chaplain at a nearby university, and with people across the region and around the country – people coming together to claim, “We will not forget. And the spirit of Toumliline can live again.”

This last week, the Men's Spiritual Discussion Group shared their monthly meal together and dove into deep and personal discussion about reconciliation. They shared with each other poignant stories of broken relationships in families, some of which found healing and patching up, and some of which remained severed

even into death. And in the midst of these stories of pain and broken relationships were powerful bright lights – ways that folks reached beyond themselves, laid themselves aside, or stepped forward into the gap and brought themselves fully into the gap to call others to a space for reconciliation. At the end, our hearts were full, as we had opened holy space with each other and had glimpsed not only the brokenness in our own lives and households but also the ways in which the light of God’s redeeming love shone enough for us to begin to see a new way.

Friends, I am convinced with Paul that neither life nor death nor any force can separate us from the love of God. God’s quest for reconciliation of all creation goes on and on, and spans across the boundaries of life and death. If we have broken relationships with the living, we can make the effort from our end to seek to mend relationships and open the gateways for meeting each other once again. If we have broken relationships with people who since have died, we can pray for a mending of those relationships, forgiveness for and from those who have died, and the possibility by God’s leading through our prayers and dreams to conversations with those departed, seeking healing and praying for each other.

As a group of us pastors discussed these scriptures and especially the Gospel parables about taking the time and energy to find the lost, one of my colleagues said, “You know, love is irritating.” And he’s right. Love isn’t just all restful sweetness. Love is irritating. It takes so much energy. It takes so much laying aside my own judgements of worthwhileness. It takes so much willful choice to step out in care even with the possibility or likelihood of being taken advantage of or mocked or taken for granted or suspected.

Love has a way of standing forward. I remember how John Albee, whose life we recently remembered and honored with burial, used to speak in a somewhat loud voice with the person of the moment that he was attending to and in conversation with. This was regardless of what was going on all around, whether a choir rehearsal or a hymn or reading in church or children’s chapel. Because, to John, in that moment right then, this person was the most important person and this conversation between them was the most important thing.

Love is like that. It is irritating. It leaves ninety-nine sheep to go and retrieve one lost and wandering sheep. It runs ready to embrace the wayward son who has squandered have the wealth, much to the annoyance of the begrudgingly loyal son. It is annoying in its vivid attentiveness, its readiness to know and learn and embrace, its willingness to share in experience, its utmost patience, its embarrassing loud cry to “Rejoice with me.”

This is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. So, we seek the Shepherd who seeks us. We turn again home. And we seek others who are lost. And then, at every spark of light dawning, we shout, “Rejoice with me!”