Good morning! Because we don’t have any electricity and therefore no sound system I’m going to be channeling the 8th Bishop of Ohio, John Burt this morning. Those of you who remember Bishop Burt remember that when he spoke you heard him, and so did everyone on the outside of the church in which he was speaking! For those who don’t know me, my name is Brian Wilbert and it is my joy to be filling in as Interim Assistant Rector here at St. Paul’s for Jesse Dodson who is on maternity leave...and yes we’re still on baby watch...stay tuned and we’ll let you know as soon as we know.

I’ve recently finished a 23 year tenure as the Rector of Christ Church in Oberlin, Ohio. And I feel right at home here because one of my predecessors at Oberlin, Chave McCracken served St. Paul’s as Rector after having first served the parish family at St. Peter’s Church in Lakewood before arriving in Cleveland Heights. As our diocesan archivist I revel in these kinds of connections.

Today’s scripture readings from Paul’s letter to Timothy and Luke’s Gospel is all about connections...our connection with God and God’s connecting with us! These lessons proclaim a powerful message about God’s seeking out and showing mercy to those who are lost and in need of care...and my stars, can I appreciate the concept of lost and found here at St. Paul’s because this is a barn of a building... and I mean that in the very best sense of sizing up things! It’s a veritable fortress. Although we lost some trees around the property I was grateful to see the church still standing after the big blow of a storm that came through the night before last. I thought this morning we might be singing the old hymn “Built on a rock the church doth stand even when steeples are falling...” But St. Paul’s steeple is still standing today as is the rest of the church, thanks be. And our earnest prayers are with all those in the parish and our neighbors around St. Paul’s whose property did sustain damage this weekend. Although nothing like Hurricane Dorian, Friday night’s storm and the damage in its wake serves as a reminder of the vulnerabilities of this fragile earth our island home.

Now, my former parish, Christ Church, Oberlin is just about the size of St. Martin’s Chapel...so over the past couple of weeks I’ve been careful to take my cell phone armed with it’s GPS with me whenever I leave Coventry House and enter the church...just in case I get lost and need to be found by the Rector or the Curate or anyone else on the staff!

Truthfully, everyone has been very patient with me and very generous in spirit in helping me find my way and making me feel right at home. We are connecting with one another and I am grateful for these new connections.

Gratitude is another theme in our readings for this week. The first letter to Timothy recalls Paul’s gratitude to God for strengthening him in his mission. Paul acknowledges that in his previous life he was a less than stellar individual...and by his own admission was a blasphemer, a persecutor and a person of violence. Paul also recognizes that, having been found by God, he is a recipient of God’s boundless mercy rather than God’s wrath for his former sins. And this boundless even scandalous mercy is meant for us as well. Again, Thanks be.

In the 15th Chapter of St. Luke’s Gospel, Jesus tells three parables about being lost and
found, two of which we hear today. The third Parable, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is perhaps the most well known story and one which only appears in St. Luke’s version of the Good News. We heard this story earlier this past summer but today’s parables also reveal God’s diligent searching for those who are lost. The wonderful imagery of these parables, the shepherd who asks friends to rejoice over the found sheep and the householder who invites her neighbors to celebrate the found coin show that God is a God of steadfast and unconditional love, a God who counts all people worthy—no exceptions!

I am excited that one of the pieces of ongoing spiritual formation here at St. Paul’s over the next year is hearing each other’s stories with, perhaps, an emphasis on our faith stories. There are, of course, important stories in everyone’s life. And if my mother were here today, she would happily tell you a lost and found story about your interim assistant rector. Alas, she is not able to be here so I’ll tell the story on myself. When I was about five years old my parents took my siblings and me to Cedar Point for a family outing. Cedar Point in 1965 was much different than it is in 2019 but one thing that remains the same is the Lake Erie Railroad and Frontier Town. While waiting for the return trip from Frontier Town to the main causeway through Bonesville, my family wandered into a gift shoppe. Somehow I got separated from my family and my mother became a little worried and then frantic. After diligently holding the rest of the family back she searched the area outside of the Frontier town Gift Shoppe and, when she suddenly heard the train whistle signaling its imminent departure she looked up to see me waving at her as the train pulled out of the station. A quick walkie talkie conversation with the station master on the other end had me pulled off the train to wait for my family who arrived on the next train from Frontier town. That is a story of my being lost and found by a loving parent. What is your story? When have you been lost and been found? Maybe you are feeling a little lost now and are searching to be found? Maybe you know someone who is lost and searching and you can be a conduit of God’s healing, love, and yes, scandalous mercy.

Why do I say scandalous? Well, remember the context of today’s Gospel lesson. Jesus is eating with THOSE people, tax collectors and sinners and his stories about being lost and found are really about being spiritually lost and then found by God and experiencing God’s love. This was not something the Pharisees and Scribes knew or experienced. To them what Jesus is doing is scandalous and it is scandalous...scandalous in the magnitude of God’s desire to find us and love us by helping us connect with and love one another and our neighbors nearby and far away!

Congregations are communities made up of people with stories. Some of these are particular and personal; others are communal and corporate stories of how people have embraced and live out the Gospel according to their heritage: Anglo, African, Asian, Latino, Native American... Christians all bringing cherished stories to enrich our congregation and our spiritual formation if we will listen and hear them. Over the next several weeks we will be hearing about how we, as a community of faith, already connect with each other and we’ll explore ways that we can reflect on our connections as sisters and brothers in Christ. I pray we will follow the lead of Jack Ricchiutto our forum speaker last Sunday, and simply listen to each other’s stories. Not selfie listening. Not solution listening. But simple listening as a way to hear each other, as well as seek and serve Christ in all persons loving our neighbors as ourselves to paraphrase the Baptismal Covenant in our Prayerbook.

So, here is the take away from today’s homily: Whether we are seeking the lost or in need of being found, we are embraced by God’s promise that God will always, always joyfully find us. And I’ll leave you with one more question for reflection: On your spiritual journey how have you been found by God? I’ve said these things today in God’s most Holy Name. Amen.