

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

“Finding the Lost Ones”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, September 15, 2019

I Timothy 1:12-17

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people 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? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, 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.’

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to You and to the power of Your Spirit. I pray that You would take the words and images that we have within, the words we've offered in song and in prayer, the words from Scripture and the words that You've laid upon my heart this morning to share, touch, bless, and transform all of these into the living word, your Word, the Word of Christ. And let the spirit bring that Word alive within us as each of us have need. Let it guide us, feed us, comfort us, challenge us. Let it be the word that grows within and bears fruit, for Your glory and Your glory alone. I pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

So as I came to these parables which we have heard before and are familiar to us, the one about the lost sheep and the power or the need to search diligently and the lost piece of silver. Sometimes we hear the message in sort of the shadow of what comes in Luke a little bit before in the 11th chapter, where Luke puts these words in Jesus' mouth. So I say to you ask and it will be given, search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks the door will be open. And so, as we read the passage and the parables what comes is this message that is very familiar to us. The message something along the lines of keep looking, work hard, don't stop, your efforts ultimately will be rewarded, your determination will prevail. You'll find what you're looking for if you only keep at it. Like I said, the message of Luke just four chapters earlier, ask it will be given, search you will find, knock and the door will open. This is a message that is familiar to us. You've heard it before. If you fall down, get up and try again. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps and keep going. Work harder and it will come to you. In fact, an entire religion or religious movement was built upon this premise, the nondenominational mega church seeker service phenomenon of the mid-70s that continues to flourish even in today's church. Churches are organized around the idea that you as the seeker or the doers can find or be found by God if you attend church, belong to a small group, pray and read the Bible regularly, support foreign missionaries, and offer yourself in some form of community service. If you do all these things, then you will be in, you will have been found by God, and more importantly, God's blessings will be yours. I had someone not too long ago, within the last year ask if the 9:05 service was a

seekers service. I had the simultaneous reaction of wanting to reach out and grab that person by the scruff of the collar on their shirt and go, "Urgh," and also kind of wanting to go-- but I refrained because this is the common conception of what it is to be a Christian-- that we do the work.

In fact, I came across an article this week that was written just a few days ago in the Religious News Service, on their website, that talks about the seeker orientation to church and faith, and it said, "In reaction to the pitfalls of denominations, like Lutheran, Presbyterian, etc., the mid-20th century birthed the baby boomer phenomenon of the non-denominational megachurch. American evangelism saw a rising tide of churches that were explicitly or implicitly anti-doctrinal non-traditional, focused on relevance, extroversion, positivity, attractional style, and seeker sensitivity. Often these churches were helmed by a charismatic male head pastor." This is what the article, as it talked about the downfall of one of these "charismatic male head pastors"-- how it characterized sort of the essence of this style-- this seeker style.

So according to Luke, a few chapters earlier, and our sort of ingrained American understanding of just get up and try harder, we could hear that the message of modern Christianity is work harder, keep searching, persevere no matter what, pray, study, serve, give, support, and eventually, you'll be saved. You'll be okay. You'll be blessed. You'll be so blessed, in fact, that you could give so much money that the church could buy its own private jet. But we don't go that far. But that's the message is that we're blessed to be a blessing on others, and it's all because we work hard at it. So I had all of these ideas roaming around inside of me when I headed out to a coffee shop, sat down, pulled out the text, and started to look at it again. Looking at it in the light of just do it better, harder, don't give up. And I found that there was a conundrum because, if I read the passage of Luke as it's written and not as a seeker-sensitive person, what I find is that we are not the ones seeking. We are the ones lost and eventually found. But we are lost. So I began to wonder-- what if the message of keep looking, work hard, don't stop. Your efforts, in the end, will be rewarded. Your determination will prevail. You will find what you're looking for. You'll find God if only you keep at it. What if that's all a lie-- a clever, ego-seducing, guilt-producing lie that has nothing to do with how the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Esther or Mary works in the world and in our lives and in our churches what if? And so then I came back to the stories about the lost sheep and the silver coin. The first thing that caught my attention is at the beginning of the passage, it says that the Pharisees and the scribes, the righteous ones who know everything are grumbling about Jesus and they're saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." In my notes, I wrote, "Full stop. No need to read further. This will preach." Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. Isn't that what he's done with us? He's welcomed us and we get to share communion with Him and with each other week in and week out. In a sense, that's the Gospel. Yes. He died for our sins. He rose from death. But more importantly, He welcomes sinners, those who are not convinced that they're righteous, and He eats with them. He welcomes and He eats with them.

The second thing that I noticed is that it is not us who are out looking, but it is God who is unrelenting in the search to find that which is lost. The shepherd goes after the one sheep and finds it. The woman looks all over the house and finds the lost coin. If we're not the seeker but the lost, it is God who is unrelenting in the search. And again, that's Gospel. God is constantly after our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith. The third thing that I noticed is that all of these parables, when God finds the sheep or the coin, they all talk about joy or rejoicing-- same word-- [caris?], charity, grace, peace, fullness, love that this unrelenting God who finds that which lost is filled to overflowing with goodness and joy because they found that one sheep, coin, David, Sally. Whatever it is, whoever it is, God the unrelenting one finds us. Our job is simply to recognize that we are the ones who were lost and who have now been found.

The next thing I noticed as I was sort of scanning over the sheet and kind of moving around parts of it to say, "Okay. This part's a parable. This part's commentary about the parable, etc., etc., was that if the one searching is God in these parables, Jesus says that God is both male and female, the shepherd or the woman and that we need not get hung up over gender names for God. It is our tradition that we say Our Father who art in heaven, and yet, if this parable is true, we could also pray, our Mother, who is in heaven. Because this woman is unrelenting, she finds the lost coin. She rejoices and she calls her friends together. The last thing that I noticed about the passage - and it's so subtle; it goes back to that first part of, "Well, wait, we're the ones who do it, not God," - is the refrain that there will be more joy in heaven or in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents. It sounds like that repentance is our job. We're the one who needs to repent. And when we, the one, repent, God is overjoyed, and the angels sing, and heaven dances. But if we stick to the parable, we're not the one who repents. We're the ones who are repented upon if you will because repent means turn around. And so a better way to say it is, "There will more joy in heaven over one sinner, or lost one, who is found and returned back to where they belong." That's what repentance means-- to be reinstated, to be reincorporated into God's grace. It is God who does it, not us.

And so as I was thinking about these things-- sort of the labels that we place upon ourselves --as I say all the time to myself, or out loud, that I am a Christian. And that's true. But I've been wondering what it might sound like, to my soul and to others, if I said that I am a sinner saved by grace, if this were my fundamental understanding of who I am-- that I am one perpetually lost but who's been found and restored, who's been loved and forgiven. And my job, as the one lost who's been found, is not to go out and to then find a whole bunch of other lost sheep. That's still God's work. And it may be through me or through you that that happens, but it is God at work through you-- you, the lost one, who's been restored. And again, this is good news to us because the burden is not upon us. It is upon Christ, upon the Spirit, and upon God to find that one and to bring them back-- whoever they may be.

As I so often do, I consult some commentaries. Often, the one that I most look at is called Feasting On the Word, and I ran across a story that Penny Nixon provides in her commentary on this passage. And I've titled it, Welcome To the Scoundrels' Banquet even though that's not what she says because, in some sense, we are those sinners who have been found. We are the scoundrels who've been welcomed into this glory of God's presence. And, in some sense, in the story that I'm about to share, we can hear the danger of thinking like the scribes and the Pharisees-- that we are the ones who know what's right, and we are the ones who are in. She says that many churches put conditions upon the communion table-- who can share in the Lord's Supper. In fact, in one church, there were people wearing rainbow sashes, indicating their solidarity with the LGBTQ community who, in that church or in that denomination, were refused communion. So these were people, sitting out in the pews during communion, wearing rainbow sashes. They came up, and they were not given communion. Regardless of their sexual orientation, if you were wearing a sash, you did not get communion. Well, there was a person, who was in line as they were doing communion, who kind of watched all this happen and thought, "This can't be right." And so that person took their little styrofoam wafer, and they started to break it into little pieces. And instead of putting it in their mouth, they turned around and found people wearing rainbow sashes and handed that little piece of wafer to them so that they could take communion and know that God had found them and loved them just as much as God finds and loves anyone. And this is a quote. "The church officials, the religious insiders not knowing what to do, called the police."

The Bible says that Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them. May we always remember that we are welcome at that table, as well. Amen