

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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September 11, 2016
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 15:1-10

From Grumbling to Rejoicing

Do you remember, after 9/11, the search for loved ones in the rubble?

This week, 15 years after that horrific event shattered our world, we recall the attacks and their aftermath with a bit of distance, yet empathy for the heartache still felt by those directly affected. It happens after earthquakes and floods and volcanos, too, that people are lost and those who care search and search for weeks and months, hoping at first for a live reunion, then, as that hope dies, for a body or memento to hold onto.

A recent New York Times article (8/2/2016, by Jennifer Percy, referenced by Jill Duffield, *Presbyterian Outlook*, Looking into the Lectionary blog) tells the story of families in Japan who, more than five years later, still search for their loved ones who were lost. One father has learned to deep sea dive, and regularly swims in the turbulent sea looking for his wife's remains. A mother cooks a meal for her daughter every week, and tosses it into the ocean so that her daughter won't go hungry. The emptiness in their hearts makes their lives a never-ending search.

In the weeks after the Twin Towers fell, walls and walls around southern Manhattan were covered with homemade posters of missing persons. The posters included names, photos, descriptions of what they were wearing, where they were last known to be alive, and who they were to the makers of the posters, who listed their phone numbers and email addresses. They were firemen and police officers, stockbrokers and waitresses, moms, dads, cousins, partners, brothers, sisters, friends, of all ages and racial and ethnic backgrounds, all missing, and all loved. The posters have been preserved, but joyful reunions were rare then and impossible now.

I believe that if Jesus were telling a parable in our times, a story about seeking and finding, the lost and the found, he might speak to us of these images. He lived in first century Palestine, so he spoke of sheep and lost coins and, in the third story found in Luke 15, of a lost son. We all know what it is like to lose something of value. And what could be of greater value than someone we love, who goes missing, or goes away, or disappears from our lives?

The parables of the lost may be the most poignant word we have to describe Christ's mission in the world. The emptiness in God's heart motivates a never-ending search. Christ came to seek those who are lost. And like the array of posters flapping in the wind on the walls around New York City, lost humanity includes every size and shape and age and type of person imaginable. God wants us all to come home.

Yet the larger context of these parables adds greater depth to their continuing relevance. The stories were told at a table, at a party, when Jesus was being criticized for those he included on the guest list. The criticism was coming from Pharisees and scribes, religious leaders who felt dishonored to be at the same table as unscrupulous tax collectors and those they knew to be sinners. Over the centuries, these Pharisees and scribes gained the reputation of the "bad guys" in Jesus' story, the legalistic Jews who became part of the plot to do away with Jesus and end his mission. Over the centuries, that simplistic view has morphed into anti-Semitism, and we all know the history of the ugliness of discrimination, pogroms and the Holocaust. Over the centuries, the role of the Pharisees and scribes has been taken over by Christians who felt themselves to be on the "inside" with God and

couldn't see how God would ever welcome Jews, or those they knew to be sinners, or atheists, Hindus, Muslims, pagans, you name it—those people who obviously don't belong at the same table of privileged relationship with God as US!

I've said it before this summer. In Luke's Gospel, whenever there is a dinner party, whenever people are eating and drinking around a table, there will always be a message about the kingdom of God. And today's message is clear. The Pharisees and scribes would have known he was talking to them. They may not have liked it, but they would have recognized themselves as the 99 sheep who the shepherd left in the wilderness while he went in search of the lost one. They would have understood that they were the 9 coins still in the woman's purse while she swept every dark corner of her house looking for the missing one. I think they especially would have recognized themselves as the elder son in the story of the father and his two sons, the story we often refer to as the "Prodigal Son." They would have heard, and if they were willing to give up their grumbling, maybe they would have wondered how they too could be part of the joyful parties that end all three stories.

The kingdom of God is open to all. But to live in it, we have to give up the notion that we've already earned our place in it, that by our insider status as good Christian people we are more deserving than those whom we judge to be outsiders, sinners, unworthy. The realm of God is a way of living that displaces grumbling and criticizing and judging with gratitude and grace and joy. The reign of God is a party, a celebration that God's seeking has resulted in our being found, and accompanied by the full array of human possibilities who are all sinners like we are, and all saved by the grace and mercy of God.

A church which draws boundaries and sets rigid standards for full inclusion does not resemble the kingdom of God. A church which welcomes all, and gives particular attention to the poor, the differently abled, those marginalized by society, and yes, those who are apparent sinners, looks like the parties Jesus gathered around himself, the joyful feasts he hosted and celebrated, and the table of love and welcome he shows us is waiting for us in eternity. In Presbyterian parlance, this is one of the six great ends of the church: the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world. May it be so!

For though we are not immune from grumbling—far from it—and though we can easily stray from the shelter of God's care and protection, we are a people called to speak and show and live out that seeking mission of Christ. We were lost, but in our being found, we become the way that Christ's mission continues to grow in this lost world. We are invited to the party, and to share that invitation with others. It's like a Facebook event—if I "like" it, then my friends will see that I do, and if they "like" what I "like," their friends will see it, too, and pretty soon the whole thing will go viral. If we show by our living that Christ's way is grace, not moralism, love, not fear, peace, not domination, then word will get out as it did in the first century. Religious insiders will learn that we're not so different from those we might otherwise condemn. And irreligious outsiders will learn that Jesus and his church are for them, too.

A recent issue of *Presbyterians Today* centers around this theme of "Mending relationships: forgiveness, reconciliation, and hope." It tells a story of another wall covered with words and phrases, this one put up at the Presbyterian Youth Triennium this past summer. On the wall, the organizers of the Triennium spray painted ugly, hateful words, words that the teenagers attending would all recognize, having heard them in the hallways of their schools, and other places. "Stupid," "fat," "racist," "redneck," "idiot"—you get the idea. The organizers said it was hard to put those words up, hard to look at the wall. But those attending had an opportunity to counteract those words. Cloth ribbons and

markers were nearby, and students could write messages of love and tack them over the hateful messages. By the end of the four-day conference, the wall was covered with thousands of ribbons. One young person commented, "I think that for those who have been hurt by the words written on that wall, it was especially powerful to see the love that was brought to the Triennium by participants from all around the world." And another reflected, "God's work and mercy can overcome hate. What I wrote made me think of what I can overcome every day. God is calling me to be an example of love in everyday life, with my parents, at my school, in band, and everywhere I go." (*Presbyterians Today*, Sept/Oct 2016, p. 14)

It doesn't take an advanced degree to understand this message. It just takes a heart open to change, a mind willing to be changed, and a spirit willing to learn and change. From grumbling to rejoicing, from hate to love, from judgment to joy, from sinner to saved, from lost to found—there you have it, that's what Christ can do for you and me and everyone else, too.

Welcome. God's been looking for you, and me. Rejoice with me. The kingdom of God has come near.

And we're all welcome at the table.