

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

September 15, 2019
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 15:1-10
Exodus 32:7-14
Psalm 51:1-10
1 Timothy 1:12-17

The other night I found myself lying in bed wide awake at 2am. The moon was almost full and the light was so bright that it lit up the room with a soft haze. As I watched the moon through the bedroom window I could see low hanging clouds drift by, spotted by tree branches and shadows. The house was quiet. The peacefulness was tangible. The dark of the night was warm and welcoming.

I remember thinking how beautiful the moonlit night was. That is until I heard a loud thud outside (we concluded it was a visit from our resident raccoon). Bailey started barking uncontrollably so I got up to check on him. The hair on his back was at high alert. He was ready to take on that little critter with all of his might, to save us from the dangers that lurk in the darkness. To protect us from the great unknown that we call the backyard. So much for the tranquility of the evening sky.

It made me reflect on our ability to welcome those unknown spaces into our lives as an opportunity to explore, to wonder, and to grow. Or, maybe those unknown spaces are unwelcome spaces - a source of fear and anxiety. Maybe the lesson at hand is...don't be like Bailey when those unwelcome spaces come along. Because we are all going to end up at one time or another (or maybe multiple times) in an unknown space, in what feels like scary darkness, navigating our way through a feeling of being lost and alone.

This morning, we are going to have a vocabulary lesson, something we don't do every Sunday but today, I think it will help us connect the dots in our Gospel reading as to what Jesus is trying to teach us about unknown spaces. To do this, we are going to look at three verbs from our Gospel reading and put them in context of the two parables within which these verbs are used. The verbs are: to have, to lose, to find.

I'm going to walk you through what clergy types call exegesis. That's simply looking at the texts in their original language (in this case, Greek) so that we can consider the deeper meaning and nuance of each word. Because, try as we might to translate ancient texts into English, we are often unable to convey the rich meaning or the historical understanding of these words when they were first written. We fall to our modern day way of thinking (because that is often all we have) – and that can leave us wanting more or, worse, we might misinterpret the true intent of the writers all together.

So as we read about the shepherd who lost his sheep and the woman who lost her coin let's start with a better understanding of our verbs:

The verb “to have” is understood to mean to have something in hand, either tangibly or emotionally. Either way, it’s something you are closely joined with. It matters to us. It has value.

“To lose” means to destroy, to put out of the way entirely, to render useless, to be ruined. It implies a deep separation from the thing you once held so closely to you. It isn’t about simply misplacing something. Instead, the verb “to lose” conveys a sense of grief at what is lost.

“To find” is a rich word in the Greek. It is translated as not just something we stumble upon haphazardly but something we have diligently searched for. It’s what we find by honest inquiry, through examination and observation. It’s what we discover by dedicated practice and experience. The verb “to find” implies an active seeking that turns up dynamic results.

I hope already you are getting the picture that our text isn’t just about something that has been misplaced. So, what might Jesus be getting at?

Many times, when I have read these parables in the past, I considered the central objects, the sheep and the coin, to represent sinners...people who need redeeming. Those lost folks that need to be found. But, in my previous contexts those people were always the outsiders who needed to be brought in. They weren’t originally a part of the community, the in-crowd. In this interpretation, you might say that kind of reading is a more evangelistic way of thinking about this text. Make more Christians. Plain and simple.

But I want you to look closely. The sheep and the coin were never outsiders. Remember their owners “had” them at the beginning. They were originally in their possession. They weren’t some representation of unbelieving people in need of conversion or reprimanding or judgement. They were insiders. Remember the translation of “to have”. The sheep and the coin were loved, held closely by the shepherd and the woman. That’s important.

Then we are told the individuals lost what was important to them. Something happened. Remember our definition of what it means to be lost. The connections were destroyed and rendered useless. Ruined. A fracture happened that was painful. I imagine a deep sadness coming over them as the separation set in. The relationship was broken. The owners grieved.

But because these two people actively sought after their lost items, because they never gave up, because they searched and inquired and examined and observed; because they entered into a practice of looking they were able to put the pieces back together. The union was made whole again. The relationship was mended. It didn’t matter how broken it might have been. The joy that comes from the reunions is tangible.

It’s a beautiful reminder of how God works in our lives every day. Because just like the sheep and the coin, we will be lost at times. We will harm relationships and maybe even destroy some relationships in our lives altogether. We will turn away from God, from what is good and true. We will make decisions that we regret. We will spend time in the darkness.

For me, the question that is most interesting is what will we allow to happen when we are in those dark places? What happens in that time between being lost and being found?

First, we need to remember that God loves us so much and when our relationships are broken, with God or with others, God grieves that brokenness. God grieves for us in our pain. And, God is going to keep seeking us and pulling us back to wholeness no matter how long it takes.

Second, in order to be found not only do we need to be sought after, we also need to be willing to learn and grow from the process of being lost. Remember how active the verb “to find” is in our context. It requires dedication and practice, inquiry and observation. And, that won’t always be easy, but it is necessary.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, *“When we run from darkness, how much do we really know about what we are running from? If we turn away from darkness on principle, doing everything we can to avoid it because there is simply no telling what it contains, isn’t there a chance that what we are running from is God?”*

In other words, being lost makes it possible to be renewed. But, it takes our ability to honestly engage with what we have lost within ourselves along the way. And, it takes our desire to trust that God is searching for us, wanting us so badly to be found.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

For further reflection...

David Wagoner

Lost

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
 Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
 And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
 Must ask permission to know it and be known.
 The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
 I have made this place around you.
 If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.
 No two trees are the same to Raven.
 No two branches are the same to Wren.
 If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
 You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
 Where you are. You must let it find you.