

NOTHING SHORT OF A MIRACLE

LUKE 15:1-10

RALLY/COMMUNITY DAY, 150TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

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Today's parables from Luke remind me of the day, years ago, when I was making a train change in southern France. Stepping off the first train I walked down a long platform and onto a second train that would take me to my destination.

All I had on that trip was one well-packed bag and a brand new Canon 35mm camera I purchased with all of my first paycheck earlier that summer.

This was in the days before children, before marriage, before S.U.V. roof racks and cargo carriers.

But even keeping track of one bag and a camera proved to be a challenge. When I sat down in the second train and lifted my bag onto the overhead rack I realized I left my new camera in the seating compartment on the first train. Panic surged through my stomach. Adrenaline shot through my veins, then I did something that was not so smart.

I left my bag with all of my clothes, souvenirs, and papers from my three week sojourn in France on the rack above my seat where I had just placed them – figuring I couldn't run very fast with it, yet not wanting to leave my bag untended on the platform either, I was traveling alone. So I just left it hoping I would make it back in time. But honestly my concern was that new cherished camera.

Bolting down the aisle, leaping onto the platform, I then ran an Olympic 100 meters jumping aboard the first train hoping I had the right car, dashing down the aisle, trying to remember where I was seated, finding my camera, grabbing it retracing my way back to the other train in record time just in time to board before the whistle blew and it left the station.

Luke's account of the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep and searches for the one sheep or the woman who lights a lamp and moves all the furniture in the house to search for the lost coin are adrenaline-charged search stories.

Remember the context in which Jesus told these stories. In both Luke and Matthew where these parables appear Jesus is well into his ministry. He is no longer merely an itinerant sensation. He is a trouble-maker, disturber of the peace.

The religious authorities held him in increasing contempt because he was actually redefining, re-inventing the purpose of religion. Hanging out with sinners, tax-collectors, prostitutes, low-lives, and trash. And the fine, upstanding church folk of his time didn't like it.

What is religion for, they asked, if not to build elegant temples, gather in solemn assembly and say eloquent prayers? Make public our display of piety and righteousness?

But Jesus' assemblies were by the roadside, at the well, on the hill. He met with those who knew nothing of religion or found the old faith empty.

Jesus welcomed and ate with sinners – a violation of religious law in his time equivalent in ours to opening the fellowship of the table and leadership of the church to gay/lesbian/bisexual and transgendered people.

What is the purpose of religion? This new and bold leader talking about the kingdom of God was striking a chord, resonating with the people. He was radical and dangerous.

Today's parables follow, by the way, the parable of the great feast in which a wealthy landowner prepares a banquet for his friends and no one comes. All of them have excuses. So the host opens his house and table to any who will come – proclaim in the streets, he says to his servants, the table is set, the feast prepared.

What is the purpose of our religion? It is a feast to which all are invited. But it must first and of necessity be a search for all who are hungry and lost and alone and broken.

Hence, Jesus' parables of the lost. The lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son – which we will talk about next week. There is an interesting distinction between Matthew and Luke's versions of the lost sheep and coin.

Matthew's sheep goes astray and "if" it is found there is much rejoicing. But Luke's sheep, lost as are the sinners who come to hear Jesus, is sought says Luke "until" it is found. The search is never over. The search is never half-hearted. The search is never secondary.

The purpose says Jesus, of our faith and religion is to restore individuals to wholeness and communities to justice and peace. To work for that day until all are brought home at last, any who are lost carried back on the shoulders of the shepherd to the care and keeping of the community.

Here we are on the 150th Rally Day of Westminster Presbyterian Church. The day on which we come back after our summer travels and reverie to a new program year of mission and education and fellowship.

And what more fitting way to celebrate this milestone of 150 years than to have our partners in mission – 25 of them represented in Parish Hall this morning and here in the sanctuary. Our friends and fellowship agencies whose mission is also to seek and save any who are lost, any who are hungry, any who suffer injustice.

You see together we are the servants of the generous master who throws that party for the entire community. Our task indeed is to go out and announce the table is ready, come, all, as you are. Come to the table where there is food and clothing and housing and jobs and justice for all!

And I would be remiss if I did not say how inspired we are by our over two dozen partner mission agencies and church groups. By your courage and dedication and sacrifice.

You sit at the bedside of AIDS victims and with their families, organize summer camps and counseling for kids on the east side of Buffalo, work to ensure the nurture and safety of newborns and toddlers, give daycare for elders and respite for caretakers, fund myriad programs that heal the social fabric of our city, tutor kids after school, build homes for the homeless, honor and encourage teenagers who work hard and are models of character, feed the hungry, reach across religious barriers to serve those in need, stand for justice and against bigotry, welcome the refugee, paint houses and build wheelchair ramps for rural poor.

This is a day to remember and recommit to the work we are called to do and the purpose of our religion.

Nor would we complete our task this morning if we did not remember those who precede us at WPC in this great commission we share – to seek and save the lost and oppressed.

We are surrounded by that great cloud of witnesses today. Beginning with Jesse Ketchum and that circle of founders of this church and the clergy and lay leaders and members of every generation since then.

So many of us think of Dr. Samuel Van Vranken Holmes. His courage against religious fundamentalism and anti-Jewish, anti-immigrant bigotry from the 1890s to the 1930s. And Dr. Butzer, through the war years and McCarthyism. Dr. Keily a beacon of hope and caring, a tower of justice in the social and political and family turmoil of the 1960s. And, of course, The Reverend Tom Stewart – a brave prophet during the nuclear arms race and earliest days of debate and struggle over homosexuality.

Whether we know it or not, or remember it or not, and sometimes we take it for granted, we stand on a strong foundation of seeking and saving the lost, the hungry, the oppressed.

And we stand today, too, on the ministry of St. Patrick of the 5th century and St. Columba of the 6th century. These Celtic saints who took the gospel into the most dangerous reaches of the Hebrides and Scotland and Wales and Ireland. Places where tribal violence and bloodshed defined human relationships and community.

Shortly we will dedicate our Celtic Cross on the South Lawn to world peace. What more fitting way to honor this day, this 150th year of our ministry, this occasion when our partners in ministry honor us with their presence – than by remembering Patrick and Columba who with only their faith to sustain them brought peace to a world of killing and conquest. Our world is not so very different from theirs, nor should our faith be.

Yesterday was the third anniversary of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington and Pennsylvania. And there is still much healing to take place not only for the families who lost loved ones and friends but in the nation and world at large.

We are concerned for our own safety and security and should be. We need to take precautions of common sense. But I sometimes worry about our pre-occupation with safety in this post 9-11, litigious society. There is an unavoidable element of risk and danger for any one engaged in the search for the lost and oppressed.

Danger not so much from the lost and oppressed themselves or the places we must go to find them as from our own comfort zones and easy justifications not to risk, not to reach out.

And here Jesus' story shows us the way. So strong is God's love for the lost sheep that the 99 are left in the wilderness while the search goes on. It is in an old gospel song, not in Luke, that the 99 safely lay sheltered in the fold.

But if the 99 are completely safe then the search for the one is merely an act of frugality, an exercise of common sense. It is foolish not to act when there is only chance of gain and none of loss.¹

The message today is, however, about the foolishness and risk-taking our ministry requires. The willingness, as God's representatives, to leave what is comfortable and even cherished to find the lost and broken.

Still I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge there may be some here today who connect less with the inspired actions of heroes of faith and saints of service than with that lost sheep or coin or prodigal son in Jesus' stories.

A colleague in campus ministry at Duke University recently shared a story about a young man he met. The Episcopal campus minister introduced my colleague to this young man saying enthusiastically, "He's going to be baptized tonight."

"How did you come to the church?" my colleague asked. "What brought you here?" To which the young man responded, "I got put here. I really mean it. I think Jesus just came out and got me. That I am here tonight planning to be baptized is nothing short of a miracle."ⁱⁱ

I don't know about you but as I look back on my life and consider being here in this pulpit today I feel the same way as that young man. When I contemplate all of the twists and turns my life has taken it is nothing short of a miracle that I am here today preaching of all things to you.

My hunch is that more than a few of us here today could say the same thing. Whether you came this morning for the first time or whether you are a fifth generation member of this church – when you stop and think about all of the other places you might have been and find yourself here today remembering and recommitting to an age old ministry of outreach and healing – when you think about that isn't it nothing short of a miracle you are here too!

Thanks to some shepherd, some parent, some teacher, some mentor, some Don Sanford in whose memory donations have been made to install our Celtic Cross today, some tender shepherd saw you alone or struggling or frightened or just weary and left the 99 and came to lift you upon the shoulders of mercy and bring you home. I would even go so far as to say that as you look around this room what you are seeing in each and every face is the story of the miracle of God's love, God's reaching out to bring us back to fullness of life.

But lest we grow too comfortable among the company of the found let us see in the cross behind me and in the cross outside at the flagpole we will dedicate in a moment,

let us see there – as Jesus did when he took up his cross – the call to be foolish, the call to take risks, the call to leave what is comfortable

and to search the darkest corners of our community and the furthest parts of the world until every lost child of God has been found and brought home. Amen.

ⁱ Fred Craddock, "Three Parables of Joy," Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 183.

ⁱⁱ William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol 32, No. 3, Year C, July through September 2004, 46.