

Saving the Lost

Last Sunday after worship, as we gathered in the Social Hall, I felt a wave of happiness sweeping over me. It was a beautiful day and after staring at the ceiling for a week in Covid isolation, it felt good to be back.

Everyone seemed to be in congenial spirits and although I know we are all struggling with one thing or another, just coming together to worship and pray and to sit around the table felt like a good reset.

Grounded in Faith Community

I was reminded of how subtle, and at the same time important it is to be grounded in community; especially in a community gathered around so life giving a force as the Spirit of Christ; where loving our neighbors is always the order of the day.

A Lost Young Man

There was a time when I didn'tt recognize the importance of being grounded in this way. As a young man I believed too much in myself. I believed that I was better off finding my own way,

apart from the help of any spiritual community; that the only path to a good life was to be the sole architect of my own happiness.

And so I nibbled at this or that theory, reading books about spirituality and religion written only by authors I trusted. And I worked at putting the pieces together into my own personal religion, always tempted into thinking that my own conclusions were more correct and suitable for my own life, than anything a church could provide.

I still do believe wholeheartedly that God gave us minds to think for ourselves; that God wants us to draw our own conclusions and make our own choices. But I no longer believe that personal salvation can be found apart from some kind of commitment to being part of a spiritual community. Spiritual community provides us with something more important than having all the right answers. It creates the wider and messier setting that is necessary for us to discover the true meaning of love.

I think what happens when we avoid spiritual community, is that we are become more isolated and alone. I was like a sheep who, so lost in nibbling at the grasses of my own choosing, had strayed from the flock and slipped into a hole that I didn't know how to get out of. I looked up and it was night and I was lost.

A Society of Lost People

I'm not sure what it is that makes so many people turn away from the church today. Maybe it is a some variation of the kind of distrust that kept me away.

There are, after all, some ideas and vocabulary in the hymnals and scriptures that sound pretty outdated to the modern ear. The message of Jesus's self-sacrificial love seems strange to a culture that is constantly being encouraged to look for the best deal at the lowest cost.

For some, church is boring. And it is true that there is no way we can compete with the highly produced professional entertainment that is readily available on mass media or elsewhere. (Although, I would argue that one of the most important blessings of church is its challenge to discover the extraordinary hidden in the ordinary).

Some have internalized the drumbeat of negative media stories about churches and come to feel that church is just a bad idea. And then there are still others who feel that life is just too busy and that Sunday morning is their chance to sleep in.

For whatever reason, the majority of people in our communities have cultivated and hardened their reasons for why going to church is not for them. And to my mind it is a terrible pity. Because overall our society is coming apart and increasingly full of lost and lonely people, people without a true sense of purpose, who are deeply dissatisfied with everything and screaming for a life that is worth living. And the church, exists to draw them in and provide them with the very thing they most desperately need.

Expectations

But I think that there is another reason why the lost don't that turns the spotlight back on us. I think they don't come because we do not expect them to. We assume that by now, their views have become so fixed that there is no point in even asking. The they will basically remain as they are and will never change.

This is an assumption that is challenged by our second reading from Timothy. In that reading, Paul, who was once Saul, the deadliest enemy of the church, expresses gratitude for how Jesus came to him and completely transformed him from a man of violence into a servant of Jesus and champion for the church. It can and it does happen.

A little more than ten years ago, my brother Mark, who preached at my installation service, had no use for the church at all. In many ways he shared the same skepticism that had once kept me away.

When Dad and Mom passed away, we spent a lot of time together talking. And I shared with him many of the ups and downs of my own love affair with the church. One of the biggest stumbling blocks for him was the fact that churches have all the same flaws and heartaches that exist in any community.

And yet, in spite of this, I wanted to convey to him that a shared commitment to sit at the feet of Jesus and to hear his words and live by his Spirit, makes all the difference. It is what restores the world and brings salvation to lost souls.

Mark seemed to me to be thoughtfully skeptical about it all, so I didn't push it. I had no expectations that my words would change anything. But in part through my words, and perhaps more-so through the death of Mom and Dad, God must have spoken to him. Because suddenly he was all in with church and announced that he was going to Seminary. He was like Paul, after he fell off his horse before the voice of Jesus. The scales fell

from his eyes and he went into action with a new purpose and vision. And he has been like this ever since.

How to be Connectors

So how can we in the church be the shoulders of the Good Shepherd and bring lost sheep into the fold? Certainly it must be by loving as Jesus loved.

And one clue to the nature of his love is in the most perplexing details of this morning's Gospel reading; the fact that Jesus leaves 99 unattended to go in search of the 1.

This is a great clue for us. If we too are to embody God's love, we should expect that our own attention will also be fixed, less on those who are well within the fold, and more on those who lost or straying.

When we sense in another person that something is bothering him or her and we see that that person is beginning to self-isolate or is nursing a grudge; or when we encounter a visitor who feels anxious, surrounded by unfamiliar faces, and is sitting alone at a table, it may be a good time to set everything else aside and give that person our full attention.

It's not always easy. I thought about this yesterday as I watched King Charles the Third come out for the first time to greet the crowd of mourners and well-wishers. With every word and handshake, he tried to pause in a way that would give each exchange a feeling of personal connection; a moment of his undivided attention. That seemed like the most important thing for him to be doing in the moment. And it made me realize how much intentionality has to go into creating this kind of connection in a world in which our interactions often take place at such a hurried pace.

Personal Attention

And yet, what is more meaningful than having a conversation with someone who gives you their undivided attention? I think it is one of the most important gifts one person can offer to another person. For a brief time, all other concerns are set aside and the only concern the other person has is with being present and open to what is in your heart.

In moments like this, true connections become possible. When we are really present with another person, all distractions aside, we begin to appreciate the unique complexity and beauty of that person. We see past the bits of tarnish that cover the “shining coin” beneath. And we can begin to understand and identify with

that person's journey and make out the contours of their joys and sufferings.

In those moments it becomes clear that we are not simply ships that pass in the night, but that we are a tremendous gift and consolation to each other; that God is not only far away in a place called "heaven", but is very present with us through the Spirit that enters us in these moments of recognition.

So it seems that one of the characteristics of God's love is the ability to give others our undivided attention, to set aside the 99 in order to be present with the 1.

Today's Distractions

That's why I think one of the things we shouldn't do is look at our watches or become preoccupied with our cell phones, when we are talking to someone. Obviously, there are times when we are interrupted and really need to take the call. But it seems to me that allowing ourselves to be distracted by media or friends in far places, when other people are speaking with us right here and now, is short-circuiting something that is essential to our spiritual well-being as a community. It preoccupies us with the 99 other

things going on in the world, when our attention should be focused on the one who is right in front of us.

And because our phones can ring or beep so suddenly and arrest our attention, I think it requires a shepherd's vigilance, self-discipline and patience to stay focused on keeping our full attention where it belongs, especially when one of God's lost sheep is calling to us from the hole that he has fallen into.

I am reminded here of something my friend Laura Porter said to me about her deceased father. She said that growing up she was convinced that she was her father's favorite. But she discovered later that each of her siblings were also convinced that they were his favorite. Tears welled up in her eyes as she remembered him. And I thought to myself, "Well isn't this a very good example of the love of Jesus in the Gospel reading for this Sunday?"

Last Question

So let me leave you with a question that I think follows from what we have touched on this morning.

- Who do you know that seems like a sheep who has grazed too far afield and can't find home?

- And when you next see the one who's face is flashing across your mind, will you remember to make this one gift to him or her - to set aside all the demands and distractions of the world and give that person your full and undivided attention?

- Who knows what may happen in the moment of connection that follows. Maybe God will bring a lost sheep home.