

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from September 16, 2007

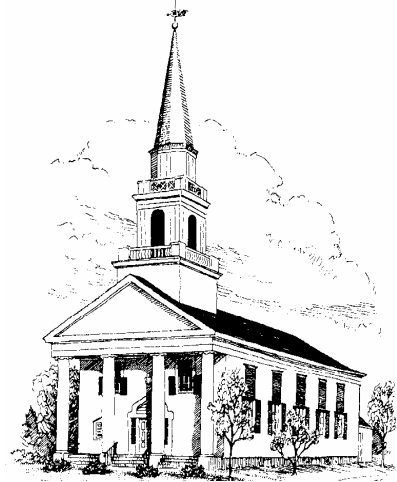
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

“Lost and Found”

Scriptures:

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-32



I found two different quotes about this week’s texts that I thought were particularly pertinent to this morning’s texts. The first reads: “The church is the great lost and found department. Jesus is on a search-and-rescue mission.” (*Anonymous*) The second reads: “The main requirement for being found by Jesus is to be lost.” (*William Willimon*)

The best news of the good news is that, no matter who we are and no matter where we are on life’s journey, no matter what we’ve done or not done somewhere along the way, we are each a beloved child of God. Over and over again, Jesus emphasized the message that each of us is worthy in God’s eyes.

In this week’s reading from Luke’s Gospel, Jesus responds to those who grumble because he eats with sinners. First he tells the story of a shepherd who loses one sheep and who leaves the other 99 sheep to search for the one that is lost. And when he finds that one lost sheep, he calls his friends together to rejoice. Jesus then follows that story with another about a woman who loses one coin and who turns her whole house upside down to find that one lost coin. When she finds it, she gathers her friends and neighbors together to rejoice. Finally, Jesus tells the story of the father who has two sons. One asks for his inheritance and departs to get himself really lost out there in the world. He then returns home to be lovingly received back by the loving father who then declares a time to rejoice & celebrate.

Today we look at the lost and the found. Jesus responds to those who grumble that he eats with sinners with stories about things and then people are lost and then found again with great rejoicing. The focus each time in the end is all about the rejoicing that follows when something or someone is found. A part of each of us, at one time or another, has been, or might be currently, or might become very lost at some time in the future. I believe we all know about being lost.

We can hear Jesus reminding us that God knows the smallest lost parts in each of us. God knows the part of each of us that is lost. Jesus also reminds us that God—like the shepherd, like the woman, like the father of the prodigal son—always seeks to find us and welcomes us back with great joy. God always seeks to find us and restore us to wholeness. And God rejoices when God finds us.

“We humans sometimes pride ourselves on seeing the big picture. God, however, deals in the little pictures—the lost sheep, the lost coin, the tax collector, the sinner, the lowliest of the low, the minor player, even you, and me. When we are found, God joins our smallness to the infinite and incomprehensible big picture of God’s perfect love that connects and heals all. We give thanks to a God who seeks out the one among the many and whose transforming love makes each of us ‘worth it’.” (*Rebekah Miles & Len Delony in Disciplines for This Week’s Texts.*)

We also heard this morning a confessional piece of a letter of Paul to his friend and colleague, Timothy. Paul reviews and recognizes his own past when, in his ignorance and blindness, he sought to get rid of followers of Jesus. He gives thanks that God’s grace found him, picked him up and helped him begin a new life. Paul recognizes the power of Christ’s presence in his own life and how far he has come from his own lost state to being found by God. Paul celebrates with joy his being found by God!

It is one thing to lose someone or something. It is quite another thing to know ourselves as lost and needing to be found. Probably each of us could share a story about a time when we recognized God’s grace in our lives, a time when God’s loving presence found us and transformed our lives into something new. Maybe we don’t speak about that moment as much as we might. I imagine many of us, like Paul, could testify to what we’ve become by God’s grace. Think about the stories and moments in your own life when you were lost. Consider how you were found.

Each of us has a story somewhere where we have made poor choices, where we went down the wrong pathway, where we got lost along the way. None of us is immune from life’s hardships, life’s disappointments, and life’s suffering. No one is immune from being lost sometime. Yet most of us keep on trying, don’t we? We keep hoping to get it better the next time. We keep yearning to be found and brought out of our *lostness*.

Once upon a time, the story tells us, a Sufi stopped by a flooding riverbed to rest. The rising waters licked the low-hanging branches of trees that lined the creek. There, on one of the branches, a scorpion struggled to avoid the rising water of the stream. Aware that the scorpion would drown soon if not brought to dry land, the Sufi stretched his hand out along the branch reaching out his hand time after time to touch the stranded scorpion. Over and over again, the scorpion stung him. And the scorpion kept its grip on the branch.

"Sufi," said a passerby, "don't you realize that if you touch that scorpion it will sting you?" The Sufi replied as he reached out for the scorpion one more time, "Ah, so it is, my friend. But just because it is the scorpion's nature to sting does not mean that I should abandon my nature to save."

We are all works in progress. None of us is ever really finished. Like the Sufi in the story, we are each figuring out how to be who we really are. We become ourselves only one moment at a time. As a result, in every experience of every day, we become more or less of what we want to become.

Jesus says that we cannot and do not need to earn God's love. Like the one lost sheep,

the one lost coin, and the lost son in this morning's readings, Jesus assures us that God deems even the smallest of things and each of us as worthy.

God is right there alongside us, like the Sufi holding out his hand to the scorpion, trying to help us. God offers each of us this free gift of grace. The grace of god is there for each of us. The good news of our faith is that God really is out to save us. God wants to find the lost. God wants to bring each of us to wholeness.

Our task is to accept this free gift of grace and to continue striving to love and accept others with the same unconditional love.

Let us give thanks and rejoice! Amen.

