Sermon for The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, September 15, 2019
Title: Lost and Found

Years ago, I met a parishioner who once spent her college breaks working at Disneyland. You would not have guessed it from this very down to earth, strong, direct fifty-year-old leader, but she had passed many a day in the happiest place on earth dressed as a princess, ushering awe-struck children into restaurants, hotels, and a whole new world. She told me once that early in every season, the management of the theme park would call the entire staff together for an important meeting. There was the guy who sold you your entrance ticket next to Snow White and Cinderella; the janitors stuck between roller coaster operators and Mickey and Minnie Mouse. I’m sure today, various Toy Story characters would be in the mix. Add to that everyone who worked at the restaurants, games, and carts.

Some guy from corporate spoke to them about the mission of the park, and the ways in which each one of them might contribute to a priceless family memory. And then he said something that has stuck with her all these years: that while they were selling tickets and monitoring lines, while they were waiting tables or posing for photos, while they were busy doing the thing they had been hired to do, they were to always remember that they had one even more important job: keeping an eye out for lost children. Every single employee of that park was alert to that fact that an average of 11 children go missing, usually briefly, in Disney parks each day. They were to look out for these vulnerable little people and their likely terrified parents, and do everything they could to reunite them.

In this morning’s Gospel, Jesus is also terribly concerned with lost people and lost things. He is speaking to scribes and Pharisees who have criticized him for keeping company with “sinners.” In response, he shares two parables, highlighting the lengths to which a shepherd or a housekeeper is willing to go to recover what has been lost. He draws a parallel with God, saying that just as someone rejoices when they find their lost sheep or lost coin, “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”
On the one hand, this reminds me of something a journalist friend recently said while various friends bemoaned how dark and heavy our news cycles have become. He shrugged and quipped, “It’s just not part of my job to cover the planes that land.” It made me think, that, ironically, when our news is focused on what is out of the ordinary - the thing or person misplaced or mistreated - the assumption behind that is actually that most of the time things in the world are going pretty well. The background is good, positive, safe. The norm is community, protection, the herd and the shepherd - not the lost sheep.

On the other hand, I think we can all understand and feel grateful for what Jesus says this morning. We can imagine, either intuitively or from personal experience, how the lost sheep, or the lost child in Disneyland, must feel – how scared, overwhelmed, and alone she would be. And if we are honest, we know these feelings can come at any point in our life. We know that, even as adults, we still sometimes feel lost, too, and there is just nothing like being found. Because when we are lost, we are vulnerable. We are at great risk. It’s not that the lost sheep is loved any more than the 99 left behind; it’s simply that their need is so much greater in that moment.

But these parables say more to us than simply a word of comfort. There’s more to them. For starters, they don’t obviously mean what Jesus says they mean. At the end, he seems to be making a point about sinners repenting – people who have turned away from God turning back, turning home. And yet in both stories, the sheep and the coin are not found because they want to be found. They do not turn toward their owners. They make no conscious choice to come home. They are found only because the one who lost them misses them terribly, cherishes them, and is willing to exert a whole lot of time and energy on search and rescue. Is willing, even, to leave the herd behind on the off chance of finding them. Now I have no doubt that all the company of heaven rejoices whenever we choose to repent and turn our hearts back toward our source and center, but today’s Gospel seems to be saying something else: that even when we don’t do that, even when we can’t do that, even when we simply won’t do that … when we are unable to look for God, whatever the reason, God will come looking for us. God does not, God will not, give up on us. God will always find a way to bring us home.

I imagine that the tax collectors and sinners thought Jesus was telling them something about why he chose such colorful and questionable company. Can’t you just imagine one nudging his neighbor, whispering, “I suppose that’s what he thinks he’s doing, hanging out with such riff raff. Such undesirables. Going after the lost.” But I wonder if the joke isn’t on them; if
this parable isn’t saying something even more subversive: not only that Jesus welcomed the tax collectors and sinners, the prostitutes and possessed, the queers and queens, but that he welcomed those self-righteous, judgmental Pharisees and scribes, too. He was willing to go after them as well. That he was willing to put everything else aside until they, too, had been brought into the fold.

It was the early 1980s in a lovely little suburb of Seattle. Rebecca had become the head pastor of the local United Methodist Church a few years earlier, and the parish had flourished under her able leadership, keen vision, and gentle presence. One day an active, a longtime parishioner, Chuck, came in to her to talk about his new life and his new love. Rebecca knew he’d been devastated by his recent divorce but was surprised to hear he had found new life and new love in partnering with John. Chuck shared that he had always felt “unacceptable to God” as a gay man, but, driven by desperation and despair, he’d come to accept his sexuality and found himself liberated from shame, living lighter and freer than ever before. “Now that I know that I am gay and that love is possible for me,” he said, “I know that God loves me.”

Homophobia was on the rise in their surrounding urban and suburban scene, and the national Methodist Church was about to pass legislation that would deny ordination to those identifying as what we would now call LGBTQ. Chuck felt this discrimination keenly. As a teacher in the local public schools, he knew he would be fired if he came out publicly as gay. Pat, another active member in a similarly sensitive professional setting, lamented that there were no legal protections in place for them. Together, they came to the parish board, talked about how much the Church and their faith meant to them, how much they loved their parish, and asked that they consider forming a support group for the LGBTQ community and publish a welcome in the local and particularly gay press. Rebecca, who knew this request was coming, did not know how her board would respond.

At first, there was thunderous silence, awkward and thick. Eventually, Cecil, the lay leader of the congregation (like the Senior Warden in an Episcopal parish), slowly pushed his chair back and stood up. No one ever stood up at these meetings. Cecil had grown up being called “poor white trash” by the other kids. He’d left school after eight grade, no stranger to hard work, and had tattoos covering his body. He was tough and he was a survivor. He cleared his

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1 You can read this story in full in Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and The Search for What Saves Us, by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, p. 102-106.
throat and said, “The Bible is perfectly clear on this question.” Rebecca’s heart raced. She had no idea where he was going. He continued, “Jesus said, ‘love your neighbor as yourself, and as far as I know he put not restrictions on who our neighbor is.” He moved that the board fully support Chuck and Pat’s proposal, and continued a brief speech that ended, “there will be some in our church family who will not understand … and we will lose our relationship with them. But if we don’t do this, we will lose our relationship to God.”

Other board members began to speak up, expressing their affection for Chuck and Pat, but many had questions and concerns. “Everyone is welcome in our church. Why should we single out some people and make a big announcement about it? Don’t people know they are welcome?” To which others responded, “no.” Churches had gone so out of their way for so long to proclaim homosexuality a sin, and when a people have been systematically, consistently kept out they need to be intentionally, explicitly invited in. (As I read about this event a few days ago in a recent theology book, I found it reminded me a lot of the more recent controversy around the use of the hashtag and signs saying “Black Lives Matter.”) Finally, the president of the women’s society – a position of great authority – spoke up in favor of the measure, and called for the vote. The motion passed unanimously.

This is just the story of one parish in one city in one state in one year several decades ago. Countless Christian communities and individuals have taken courageous stands just like this in other times and other places. And those stands have had costs. Rebecca’s parish saw many longtime, beloved members leave, and it was painful and it was sad. But they also saw new members come, and the parish as a whole was strengthened, knowing they had made a hard decision and survived together. Knowing they had chosen to stand with those who were being left out and left behind, to go out of their way to reunite the divided community, like Jesus, and trusted that God would see to the rest. After some years, many of those parishioners who left returned.

It might seem like the issues facing Rebecca’s Church are far off and faraway, especially in a denomination and a Diocese that has been openly affirming of the LGBTQ community for decades, but in doing so we’d kid ourselves. Hate crimes are, nationally, on the rise. Over the last few months, and as reported in the local news, three rainbow flags have been stolen from St. Bede’s Episcopal Church just down the road in Menlo Park. Trans individuals and many immigrants continue to lack basic legal protections, and many other groups that have them are
nevertheless vulnerable. The world is full of people made to feel unwelcome, unacceptable, unloved.

And yet, it seems to me that the Good News this morning is not simply that God comes looking for us when we are left behind or left out and calls us to take part in these same searches. It’s that even when we wander off - when we close the door, walk away, recoil in rage; when we don’t think we are lost but insist we are in the right; or when it turns out the child found missing in Disneyland wandered off on purpose because Daddy said no to the chocolate covered banana, and was nevertheless terrified not to be able to find his way back … even then, that God comes looking for us then, too, and that God will not be deterred by our pride, our short-sightedness, our ignorance, our complacency. We can be lost in so many ways and for so many reasons, and God is not put off.

And when God does find us, in a wilderness of our own making or a wilderness carefully crafted by others, all the angels will rejoice, not for our good sense but for God’s good grace. And God might shake some sense into us. Or God might wrap us in a much-needed embrace. Either way, when we’re ready, God will bring us home, again and again. Amen.