



Plymouth Congregational Church
2001 E. Grand River Avenue
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October 23, 2011

FROM PLYMOUTH'S PULPIT

“LOST AND FOUND”

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GOSPEL LESSON: Luke 15:1-10

I'll say one thing about the Gospel of Luke, he certainly knew how to bring Jesus right into the hearts and minds of his audience. Think of it. Here is a story about Jesus and the first clue we have in this chapter is in the introduction: tax collectors (those most hated by the people) and sinners (those most unwelcome at the tables of good Jewish folks) were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the good Jewish folk, those who kept all the proper food laws and worshiped at the Temple and held offices of high esteem, those Pharisees and Scribes were grumbling that Jesus was welcoming all this riff-raff.

So Luke tells us that Jesus simply tells them a story. But who is he telling? The sinners or tax collectors or the Pharisees and the Scribes? You see how amazing the Gospels are when you just take a verse or two and analyze it a bit? You can get addicted to this kind of study? So come along with me now and let's study a while.

First he asks a question: “What would you do?” Each time we face a decision as a Christian person, I think of this verse. As he begins to tell the story, he says, “Which one of you, having a hundred, losing one, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until

he finds it?" You see, the poor and "less than" in that society are there listening. They know sheep. Their lives depend upon their sheep for warmth, for food, and to trade for other items at the marketplace. They know what it's like to celebrate upon finding the one lost sheep. Do you remember one of Salzmann's paintings of Jesus with the lamb thrown over his shoulder? You see, that's an image of reality for this crowd. And just as they are woven into this image, Jesus hits them with a new reality: "Well, it's just like that when one who has sinned repents. There is joy in heaven." "Never mind the ninety-nine who don't need forgiveness," he seems to be saying. Let's focus on the one who comes into a new relationship with God!

But wait! The ordinary folk are with him, but what about the rich, the status seekers, those who lord it over all the poor folk? How do they identify with the story? So Luke tells us that Jesus brings another story right on the heels of the other. "What woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one, lights the lamp, sweeps the house, and searches until she finds it?" Do you see how the story builds? You begin to imagine the panic – we've all done it: car keys, money, a special picture or pieces of jewelry. She has lost it. So she lights the lamp, sweeps every corner, searches everywhere – under the couch cushions, the garbage can, the vacuum cleaner bag, under the bed and bureau. Where could it be? And when she finds it, there is such happiness and she celebrates with friends.

Well, the Pharisees and Scribes can identify with this one. It's about money. But of course, then he hits them, "There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents!" Bam! Right between the eyes. Sinners Repent! And just as we also identify with the story, we identify with our own failures to serve God and love our neighbors. The Lost and the Found. That is each of us. And even in ordinary life, we find ourselves reminded so often of the ways we can become lost.

When I was a child, my grandmother had a vine growing near her house called “Wisteria.” It was a beautiful vine that twisted and turned and at times had the most beautiful blossoms. But every so often, she would go out with her cutting shears and begin to hack away and pull it away from the house and the chimney. One day I asked her why she was cutting down the beautiful bush and she replied, “Honey, as beautiful and sweet smelling as it is, if I let it grow out of control, it will break up the bricks in the chimney and ruin the whole flower bed.”

I hadn’t thought about that vine in years until one evening, a television show appeared and the street in “Desperate Housewives” was called “Wisteria Lane.” It peaked my interest and so I settled down to watch. It didn’t take long for me to realize that the name of that street was certainly appropriate! Oh, the street was fine, but the word perfectly described the five women in this controversial soap operate. These are suburban housewives, all beautiful women, some mothers some not and the story is told by a woman who used to live on Wisteria Lane and has died. As much as I wanted to let it go, I had to see the connection between then name and these women.

Beneath the sweet smelling, flowery masks of these women lives such intense pain, guilt, jealousy, anger and dark secrets with the capacity for such great destruction that I thought to myself what a subtle genius went into the naming of that street. On this street, each person lives in her own hell, attempting to find some sense of fulfillment and happiness. Each one is looking for others to complete them, to find contentment in their own lives, all the while seeming to have an undeniable desire to take over the others. And it seems, they are all failing. I couldn’t help but think of Thoreau’s description of “quiet lives of desperation.” Each woman is looking for something that seems to be lost, needs to be found, but they can’t quite identify what that is!

The woman in our scripture reading is looking for a coin. Oh, to us, a coin is nothing. Just extra change we put in a jar or spend on a soda. But this coin represents a full day's wages! Do you see how knowing the context of the time makes all the difference as you read scripture? This woman is a desperate housewife! She needs that coin and will have no peace until she finds it.

The women on Wisteria Lane are driven by the same desire – to find what is lost. And so they lie, steal, deceive, and cheat. They are rarely honest or truthful and hardly ever caring or loving, unless for a nefarious reason.

We are all there at times, aren't we? We use the tools we have at hand and try to search for that which is missing in our families, our jobs, in all the things we possess, even in our Church. And actually, we are really looking for what's missing in our hearts. It doesn't matter whether we live in a tent, an apartment or a mansion. We all seem to look for that something, that light, that coin, that one thing that will bring us a sense of contentment and peace – something more than a new car to celebrate.

And here is Jesus, telling them in effect, "Don't despair. Don't stop looking. You will find it and when you do, you will discover that not only will you celebrate, but God will celebrate with you." When we realize that it is God's love and forgiveness and we identify with our need for love and forgiveness, we will be at peace and there will be celebrating not only in our souls, but in the very heart of God. John Wesley once described it as "preaching the faith until you find the faith."

Did you know that the word "desperate" actually comes from the Latin word "sperare" meaning "to hope." While the beginning of the word "de" would seem to cancel out or diminish the hope, there is in that word a reminder that we are never desperate – never without hope. Not if we

connect once more, not if we look until we find the one thing that is most important in our life – the presence and knowledge and relationship with Almighty God.

It is hope that keeps us sweeping and turning the house upside down. It is hope that keeps us searching for something that maybe we had, and now feel we have lost. It is hope that allows us to love, to reach out and give our hearts to another person, even when we know that love can also break our hearts. It is hope that keeps us from giving up when the worst in life hits us right between the eyes.

It is in the darkest moments, as the woman who lost the coin, that we light the lamp and ask, “What do I really need? What am I really looking for? What is it that will bring a sense of true peace into my heart?”

Each year, the church has what is called a “Stewardship Campaign” where we talk to our members and friends about giving a portion of all God has given them to the Church for Christ’s ministry. But you see, I think we’re going about this all wrong. This is not a once a year campaign. This is a campaign that for a Christian goes on every day of our lives. Every single day, we realize that God has placed in our hands the capacity to support Christ’s ministry and do greater things than we could ever dream of doing alone and we can do it on behalf of Christ Jesus! We look around us at friends and neighbors and families, we look at our homes and all we have accumulated, and we begin to wonder if we are truly giving God a fair share. Are we really giving in proportion to all God has given us? Stewardship is not a campaign – it is a way of life for us as Christians.

It’s that time. It’s time to ask ourselves, “What do I really need? What does Christ’s ministry through the Church really need? What will bring us true peace and contentment and peace?” What can we learn today from Jesus’ stories? What is our commitment to Christ? Amen.

