

Pursing God: Lost and Found
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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1 Timothy 1:12-17

12I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, 13even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-of whom I am the foremost. 16But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. 17To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Luke 15:1-10

1Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3So he told them this parable: 4"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? 5When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 7Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. 8"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 9When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' 10Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

This is the fourth Sunday that I have been preaching out of Luke, and I am beginning to notice a pattern. Luke begins each lesson by setting the scene. It's not just about what Jesus is saying, but about who is listening.

Luke 13:10 – Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the sabbath. *The whole congregation is set free by faith.*

Luke 14:1 – Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath. *Jesus teaches us how to reach out to those who don't usually get invited to Sabbath supper with the important folk.*

Luke 14:25 – Now, large crowds were traveling with him. *We talked about Jesus letting the crowd know that following him is not a spectator sport. It's an "all in" life transforming learning opportunity.*

And today, as we continue our series, "Pursuing God," Luke sets the scene again, "Now, all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him."

Church people, the well-to-do, crowds and now sinners – all waiting to see what Jesus will do. What Jesus will say.

I'm thinking about clothes pins. Are you familiar with the stop light method of behavior management employed in elementary schools? There is a paper traffic light at the front of the classroom, posted right next to the class rules. Attached

to the edges of the paper traffic light are clothes pins, the old-fashioned wooden ones with a tightly wound spring. The clothespins each have a name of a student in the class, one clothespin for each student. In the morning, everyone's clothespin is on the top of the chart, near the green light. During the day, if a student violates one of the classroom rules, they must come to the front of the class and move their pin down to the yellow section, and if they continue to misbehave, they will have to move their pin to the red section. Some charts are more sophisticated with more steps to the bottom and perhaps even ways to move up from the starting spot. Regardless of the number of steps a clothespin can be moved down the chart, each move down comes with consequences, from the walk of shame to the front of the class, to a visit to the principal's office, to the report sent home each day.

No child whose clothes pin is on the bottom of the chart is running home to show their mom their daily report. No, that child will wait, hoping that their parent will forget to ask or lose that paper report somewhere between the classroom and home.

I know, because I remember being that child. My third-grade teacher, Mrs.

Cushing, had a whole set of face stamps, from smiling to grim, to frowns. Because

she knew our proclivity for losing paper reports, at the end of the day, she would call us each to her desk, so that she could stamp the back of our hands. Now, I was a chatty child, so often enough that it is seared in my memory, the stamp I received was a frowny face. I think it bothered me most because my friend/nemesis, Allison, always got a smiley face.

The students whose pins are at the bottom of the chart are not congregating around the teacher's desk during free time, no they are hanging out in the back of the room, ashamed, or acting up, or tuning out. But if they had been in Jesus class, they would have been the ones leaning in to see what Jesus had to say. And the kids with the smiley face stamps (aka the Pharisees) and the kids with their clips still on green at the end of the day, would start grumbling, "why is he spending so much time with the kids in the back of the room?"

They are the ones, the sinners and tax collectors, along with the grumbling Pharisees, get to hear Jesus tell the stories that help them know that he sees their worth more than their sin.

"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"

I can tell you which ones of them, and us, would leave 99 perfectly good sheep in the wilderness to go after one wayward sheep. None of them or us! We would double down and make sure we didn't lose any more sheep, not head off leaving the others to scatter or become wolf supper while we tracked down one wayward sheep.

But there are some who follow Jesus' economy. I met one this past week, our state Senator Floyd Nicholson, who told me about the golf tournament he founded to support EMACH (Emerald Men Advancing and Changing History) and GEMS (Greenwood Eagles Men of Success), mentoring programs that focus primarily on high school minority males, and designed to bridge the gap in academic and social development for participants." Nicholson and his partners asked school administrators to send them the students with the lowest test scores and the worst behavior records. Time spent with mentors lets these young men know that they are valuable enough for someone to seek them out, to look beyond the test scores and the conduct records, to carry them through the homestretch of high school and into a hopeful future.

One of my seminary professors, Rev. Jim Watkins, related this story in our Ministry in the Public Square class. Jim was with a delegation to Moscow where

he was able to meet with some Russian Orthodox priests. This parable of the lost sheep came up in their discussion, but the Russian priests did not seem to know it. Jim proceeded to tell them the story that Jesus had told the tax collectors, the sinners and the Pharisees. A light of recognition came across their faces. Yes, yes, we know that story, but we know it by another name, "The Incomplete Flock." The orthodox priests refocused the story, so that the whole body, the congregation, shares the shepherd's loss, and the shepherd's desire to not lose even one.

I'm left wondering who Jesus is really after, because it seems that the tax collectors and sinners already know him, already follow him, already know they need him. Perhaps it is the righteous grumbler who has gone astray.

Today Laine read to us from Paul's letter to his young protégé, Timothy. You know Paul right? Paul was a Pharisee. A very important Pharisee who had been given free rein to persecute Jesus' followers. He was on his way to arrest some people who were following the Jesus way, when he was literally knocked off his high horse and made to see not only the error of his ways, but the grace of Jesus' way. Paul writes,

12I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, 13even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-of whom I am the foremost. 16But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost (sinner), Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.

In other words, if Jesus can redeem Paul, he can redeem anyone. And what became of Paul? He became a seeker of the lost, looking outside the Jewish circle to gather in the Gentiles. I wonder who Jesus is calling us to gather in? Who God might be pursuing through us? Even us, imperfect as we are.

I have been reading Mustard Seeds, the blog of Presbyterian pastor and sixth grade social studies teacher, Josh Akers. This is what Josh said about himself in a recent post:

There's a lot of things that I get wrong when it comes to leading a Christ-like life. I mean I'm not going to sit here and tell you that my example is one to follow. It is most certainly not. But if there's one thing I can say for myself, it's that with all of the other options folks have, I end up being the person some people turn to when they need a minister. I hope that says something at least a little bit positive about the life I'm trying to live.

But lest I let my ego get the better of me, I am reminded that I am a sinful man in need of God's mercy. Sometimes I hope that people see that in me. I hope they don't see a perfect person that has it all figured out. I hope they see a person who uses colorful if somewhat vulgar language from time to time. I hope they see a person who belly laughs at crude jokes and rolls his eyes when the overly pious suck all the air out of the room.

And in seeing all that (and more perhaps) I hope they see that I am someone who is confident that God loves me and that surely God must love them, too.

And then on Wednesday night, Josh, also a dad wrote this:

I made my kid go for a walk with me after dinner this evening. Well, he rode his bicycle. I walked.

And he talked while he rode. We had random conversations about anything and everything that popped into his head. He talked about the things at school that were keeping him frustrated and how he wasn't happy with some of the choices he'd been making. We talked about how he could make better choices in the future and how to handle things when he felt frustrated.

It made me feel a little bit better for him. More than a few times in my life, the simple act of going for a walk and talking about what was on my mind helped me sort things out. I hope tonight's little traipse around the neighborhood did that for him. At the very least, he's going to bed this evening knowing that he is loved and cared for despite any mistakes he made today.

And then Josh concludes his blog with this prayer, and some more words from Paul:

Lord, thank You for reminding me that everyone has something they need to say. Give me the grace to be a safe place for Your children who are hurting to say what they need to say. Give me ears to listen with empathy and a spirit to help in the ways I can. Grant them peace and help them find joy.

"My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."
Galatians 6:1-2

I appreciate the way Josh wears his humanity in a way that makes space for others to share themselves with him. I think that's how it must have been those tax collectors and sinners with Jesus. He knew how to tell a good story, how to

get his feet dirty, how to laugh at himself and how to listen to others. He made space for everyone, even the grumblers with questions.

But not everyone knows that. And some who have wandered away, and some who are hiding in shame, and some who are riding around on the high horse of their own pride, need to know he is looking for them and will not rest until he has found them and brought them home. Because the flock is incomplete without them, without us.

I am reminded of another classroom chart. This one is a large circle. Actually, it is a large metal pizza pan. On the pizza pan is a magnet for each child and each teacher in the class with a picture of that child or teacher on their magnet. The circle is labeled, "The Wish You Well." And in the center of the circle is a heart. When the children arrive in school each day, they place their magnet on the Wish You Well. If any child or teacher is having a hard time, they can place their picture in the center of the Wish You Well on the heart. If any child or teacher is absent, their picture is placed in the center of the wish you well. Everyone is present, with those who are hurting or absent held right in the very center, in the heart of the classroom family.

During classroom family meeting time, the wishing well is celebrated, for all who are present and special time is taken to remember those who are not there, and those who are feeling outside the family circle because they are angry, or frustrated, confused, or sad. If the child wants, he can tell the whole class why he has moved his picture into the heart of the Well. Then, the class and the teachers, participate in the “Wish You Well Ritual.” They hold their hands to their hearts, take a deep breath, think of something precious and loving, and then hold their arms out to their friend, passing on their precious loving thoughts to the hurting or absent one, saying, “We wish you well.”

I wonder, who is in your heart that is not here? Perhaps it is someone who is traveling to see family, or away on vacation. Perhaps it is someone who is sick. Maybe it is someone who is in prison or who has too much work to do. Maybe it is someone who is ashamed to come here because they don't know what we will think of their tattoos or their piercings or of the people they love. Maybe it's someone who has been hurt by the church or doesn't know how church works. Maybe it's someone who always seems to have to move their pin down to the red light. Maybe it is someone who is here, but is carrying the heavy burden of anger, judgement, loss or grief.

Who is on your heart? I wonder, would you write their name on the heart in your bulletin? During our prayers later in the service we will pray that they will know that we are incomplete without them. We will pray that God will show us how to reach out and gather them in. We will wish them well. And during our offering time we will offer them to God.

God seeks us out when we are lost and brings us home rejoicing. Thanks be to God that it is so. Amen.

NOTES:

State Senator, Floyd Nicholson, mentoring

<http://gwdtoday.com/main.asp?SectionID=2&SubSectionID=131&ArticleID=42325>

Mustard Seed Blog

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