

San Lorenzo Community Church United Church of Christ

Sermon: Think Global, Act Local

Preached extemporaneously by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, September 11, 2016

Hear now a reading from the Gospel of Luke, 15:1-10.

¹All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. ²The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³Jesus told them this parable: ⁴"Suppose someone among you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them. Wouldn't he leave the other ninety-nine in the pasture and search for the lost one until he finds it? ⁵And when he finds it, he is thrilled and places it on his shoulders. ⁶When he arrives home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Celebrate with me because I've found my lost sheep.' ⁷In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives.

⁸"Or what woman, if she owns ten silver coins and loses one of them, won't light a lamp and sweep the house, searching her home carefully until she finds it? ⁹When she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Celebrate with me because I've found my lost coin.'¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, joy breaks out in the presence of God's angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life."

This ends our reading from the Gospel of Luke. Thanks be to God.

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There is a lost and found box in the church office. You know our building is used by a lot of people during the week. We have three or four AA-type meetings, we have a night of Boy scouts, a night a Sea scouts and three nights of Cub scouts. We have a two other congregations – the Christian Congregational Church of American Samoa and the Steadfast Covenant Congregational Church – who have been worshipping in this space for several years. Of course we can't forget our own use of the church and the preschool. Needless to say, people leave things behind and they end up in the lost and found box.

I love a good lost and found box. There are treasures to be found I tell you. One day Debbie showed me an Oakland A's bobblehead doll – I think it is still sitting on the counter, bobbing away. Maybe that same day or maybe some time later, Debbie showed me an Oakland A's souvenir watch. I don't know who is losing all of this great baseball gear, but somebody has to miss it, don't you think? After a couple of months when no one claimed that Oakland A's watch, I took to wearing it – that probably makes me a really bad person, doesn't it? But I love a good lost and found box.

It turns out that when we lose something, we often pray about it and ask for God to help us find it or have it returned. I think I can hear those lost coins clinking around on the floor of the sanctuary: lost hope, lost faith, lost self-esteem, lost perspective. So many lost items, so little time.

There is a lot that can show up in the lost and found box of your life lying in there unclaimed while you go about your everyday life. Although it's possible to lose a lot of things and keep on keeping on, sometimes when you lose something, it's a good strategy to retrace your steps and find the spot where you lost it.

Revisit the mall stores where you might have left your credit card. The sink where you took off your ring and put it in on the soap dish. Dump out your backpack to find the note from the teacher. Retrace your steps.

Where did we mislay our prayer time with God in favor of a crammed calendar and activities every second? Where did we temporarily misplace our compassion for the poor in favor of shopping? Where did we disconnect from family dinner around the table in favor of watching reruns? Where did we lose our humanity for immigrants and refugees who seek safety for their family? When did we lose our mercy and love for the world and make everything about me, me, me?

There is so much we can lose. We can lose Direction Faith Faculties or Friends. We can lose Focus Ground Hair and Hope. There have been occasions when I have lost my Heart Head Keys or Mind. Perhaps you have lost your Mobility Perspective Respect or Spark; or maybe you have lose your Sanity Teeth Temper or Touch. There is so much we have lost on the trail behind us. Retrace your steps and find what was lost.

I know I have shared this story before with you. I love this story. I can relate to this story and I think it speaks to all of us.

Tony Campolo is a preacher and he tells of a time he was speaking in Honolulu. Campolo lives on the east coast so his body was six hours ahead of Hawaiian time. At 3:00 in the morning it felt like 9:00

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to him. Awake and hungry for breakfast, he found himself in a "greasy spoon" café in the small hours of the morning. As he bit into his doughnut, eight or nine prostitutes walked in. They had just finished for the night. Their talk was loud and crude, and it was difficult to avoid listening in. He heard one tell the others it was her birthday the next day. "What do you want from me? A birthday cake?" was the sarcastic reply. "Why be so mean?" she replied, "I was just telling you. I don't expect anything. I've never had a birthday party. I'm not expecting to have one now." When Campolo heard this he made a decision.

When the women left, he went over to the café owner, a guy called Harry. "Do they always come in here?" "Yes," said Harry. "Including the one who sat next to me?" "Yes, that's Agnes. Why do you want to know?" "Because I heard her say it's her birthday tomorrow and I thought we might throw her a party." Pause. Then a smile grew across Harry's lips. "That'd be a great idea." A moment later his wife was in on the plot.

Half past two the next morning, Campolo had brought decorations and Harry had baked a cake. Word had got out and it seemed as if every prostitute in Honolulu was in the café – plus Campolo, a preacher. When Agnes entered with her friends, she was flabbergasted. Her mouth fell open and her knees wobbled. As she sat on a stool, everyone sang "Happy Birthday". "Blow out the candles," people shouted, but in the end Harry had to do it for her. Then he handed her a knife. "Cut the cake, Agnes, so we can all have some." She looked at the cake. Then slowly said, "Is it alright ... would you mind ... if I wait a little longer ... if we didn't eat it straight away?" "Sure. It's okay," said Harry. "Take it home if you want" "Can I?" she said, "Can I take it home now? I'll be back in a few minutes." And with that she left, carrying her precious cake out the café.

There was a stunned silence. So Campolo said, "What do you say if we pray?" And they did. Campolo lead a group of prostitutes in prayer at 3:30 in the morning. When they were done, Harry said, "Hey! You never told me you were some kind of preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" Campolo answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning." Harry waited for a moment. Then he kind of sneered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that."

Wouldn't we all? Wouldn't we all love to join a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning? Wouldn't we all love to join a church that spends its time and truly values the moment when the lost are found – when we retrace our steps to find all that has been left on the trail of broken lives behind us? Wouldn't we all love a church that embraced the problems and issues, the joys and celebrations of the universe and then acted right here in our community to create peace and hope and belonging?

Wouldn't we love to join a church that shares its space with drunks and addicts who are looking for a way out? Wouldn't we love to join a church where young people want to learn skills, practice honor and integrity and explore how they can have an impact on the world? Wouldn't we love to join a church where people can worship differently than us but still seek to be followers of the same Jesus? Wouldn't we love to join a church that welcomes even us and celebrates us no matter where we are on life's journey? Wouldn't we love to join a church that is courageous enough to speak out about peacemaking and justice in this world?

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So, here I am, flawed and imperfect, with my own questions and doubts, with my own fears and challenges, with my own trail of brokenness and all that I lost trailing behind me. Here I am this morning to tell you, in this place, – welcome to church.

Amen.