

CALLED TO THE COMMON GOOD: TOGETHER

Ordinary Time

Luke 15:1-7

A Sermon Preached by Pastor Catherine Foote
University Congregational Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture:

Luke 15:1-7¹

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just 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."

Pastor Catherine Foote:

Prayer:

God
May the words that we speak,
May the hearts that we open,
Find grace in your heart and in your sight,
For you are our rock and our Redeemer. – Amen.

I know for many of us it's not easy to be here, and yet where else would we be but together?

You know last Monday when the worship community gathered to talk about this worship service, we knew it would be a moment to pay attention to. And so, for those of you who came expecting me to preach from second Thessalonians and really looking forward to what that might have to say, I have to let you know on Monday we changed the text. And I have to also tell you that when we suspended our second Thessalonians exploration, we sat together and we thought what text could we have? It was stunning that even I, who feel so fluent in Bible speak, wasn't sure what text to turn to. And then I thought of Luke 15: the lost sheep. Of course! We were going to come together this Sunday and look out on the lost people and reach out to them and let them know there was a place right here for them as well.

It's what I expected to be doing today. I thought I was going to be the shepherd. I never imagined I would be the sheep. But here I am feeling lost. And here we are, some of us as a community also

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). 1989

feeling lost and some of us, quite frankly, feeling found in ways I do not understand. Here we are a community gathered.

I have to tell you one other thing about this text. — And many of you know this story because you've been with me for 15 years of ministry in this place. — This was the text I was assigned when I was candidating in for this ministry in this congregation. It was the text that was assigned by the lectionary for September 16, 2001. And I had the exact same experience with the text. I started the week thinking I would be gathered with the community who felt very found. And it was on a Tuesday that week, too, when our perception of who we were turned upside down, and we saw in stark relief what it means to feel lost.

It's poignant to me that here we are with this text again. You know, Jesus was speaking to a community that knew what it meant to feel lost. And I have to say to you, I have to admit – confess – to you, I don't often feel what it's like to be lost. Especially these 15 years with you, my goodness! What we have seen in our world: an African-American man elected president! Marriage equality the law of the state and then the law of the land. And you know I stood: "this little light of mine I'm gonna let it shine."² But I'll tell you when the light is everywhere, sometimes it's hard to see my little light.

On Tuesday night as the election returns came in and darkness fell. I went for a run, and there was very little light. And in that kind of darkness, aah, you could see the light! You can see one candle burning. It is those times of lostness, I will guarantee you, that let us step forward into our faith with a light that cannot be put out. When we stand in the light with our little light, we might think we lit it ourselves. We might think it's all about us. We might think everything is good. But when darkness falls, when in that sense of lostness comes, that's when we know that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.

I am not speaking about one political party versus another. That's not what I'm talking about. I am talking about a world where Black lives matter. I am talking about a world where who I love does not get me barred from the table. I'm talking about a world where *this sacred earth* is honored and held and stewarded and respected. I'm talking about the church being the church of inclusion and welcome in community. That's what I'm talking about. Amen. [Yah.]

And I'll tell you something else I learned about lostness this week. I always thought ... I always thought in reading this text that that lost sheep had wandered off and that my job was to be careful about my own wandering and maybe careful about yours, too. I'll go get you; I'll bring you home! Shepherd that I am, it never occurred to me that sometimes those sheep are lost because they were scattered. They were scattered! But that's happened on my farm, too. And, oh! My goodness when I find *that* sheep – the one that was scattered in fear – when I find that sheep, that is genuine rejoicing. That's what we're here today to talk about.

This is indeed a time of grief for many of us. I might say half of us in this country. It is a time of grief. And I stand with those grieving, because I'm grieving to. But I also have to tell you I have grieved before; I have grieved alone when the love of my life died. And I stood by her side knowing I could do

² From the African-American spiritual "This Little Light of Mine." For two versions see hymns 524 and 525 in The New Century Hymnal. Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, OH. 1995.

nothing but pour out my broken open heart in grief, and anyone who told me to "get over it and to move on" was just talking to air, because I had to grieve. And I know what it's like to be in a community of grieving. I do know that! We have stood together in hard times. And others have stood in community in the hard times. I know what it's like to grieve.

Here's what I know: we need to be as gentle as we can to one another and to ourselves. We need to find a way to be together even when we think all we want is to be alone. And when someone says, "Can I give you a hand?" "Can I bring you a meal?" "Can I just sit with you?" just say, "Yes." Say "Yes," whether you know you need it or not. Be gentle in your grief.

And let me also say: Do not rush to close that broken-open heart again. Don't rush through your grief. Number one, you can't do it anyway. And number two, good theologians and good mental health professionals and good pastors tell you there is something holy in the grief. It says that things are not as they might be. It says I'm hurting; and I'm just hurting. So let yourselves grief. Yah. And breathe.

Now here's the other thing I know, though. I say it all the time; and am not going to say it again unless I believe it -- and I believe it strong. Grief is not the end of the story. This story about lostness does not end in lostness. None of those three stories do. And you know Jesus told them – bang! bang! bang! – one after the other: lost sheep, lost coin, lost child. And every place of lostness in those stories finds its way home. Sometimes it finds its way back. Sometimes someone goes and lifts it up ... Lifts me up, and carries me home. That's called hope. And I am not talking about that empty kind of hope that relies on the results of a particular moment. It might be hard to hear in the midst of our grief that there *is* still hope in the world.

It is not the hope that counts on *my* outcome. It is the hope that says, "*What* can separate us from the love of God?" I'm convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth nor anything else in all Creation will be able to separate us from the love of God.³ Nothing will separate us. That's the hope I'm talking about. It's the hope that takes this sacred moment of grief and looks beyond to a longer view. And hope must always take the longest view.

We heard a lot on Tuesday – I watched it – of people going to Susan B. Anthony's grave putting their "I Voted" stickers right there. It's a ... It was a local tradition that became national this year because of that kind of hope.

But you know the whole story is Susan B. Anthony died holding on to the long view, because she died about 20 years before women got the national right to vote. We *hold* to a long view; that is our hope. We will die without getting to the Promised Land. We will! It's the nature of life. For everything we receive, we will still see things far-off that we can't get to, that we are walking towards, that our children will see. And we trust those children. I trust those women who came back to Susan B. Anthony to say thank you. But, more importantly, she trusted them, too. She saw us looking forward. That's hope.

There's another piece to that hope, though. It's the hope that comes when we *are* the people we know we are called to be.

³ See Holy Bible, New Testament, Paul's letter to the Romans chapter 8, verses 38-39.

In the Susan B. Anthony myth, the story goes she never got to vote, but she voted anyway. She voted anyway! She was arrested for it. She was fined for it. But she did it anyway. She was the change she wanted to see in the world.

You know, gay and lesbian couples in this congregation were told they couldn't get married, and what did they do? They got married anyway! They sat together in a sacred ceremony. They were blessed. They were embraced by a community. They got married anyway.

We can still be – we are still called to be – the change we want to see in the world. That is our hope. It is the simple hope of sitting down for tea on a Friday afternoon. It is the simple hope of sitting with refugees who are Muslim in the basement of this church and saying, "You *will* be safe tonight because we stepped up to make this place safe for you." It is the hope of being the community we are called to be, recognizing a sacred earth and gathering every month to say, "What must we do to make that place real?" It is the hope of every one of you, when you sat down with your children the day after the election and told them, "All was not lost." You know you might've shared your broken heart with them. But I know you. I knew, I know your next words were we will get through. We have a faith that's deeper than this moment. We call it a "Comma."⁴

It makes me want to tell you one last story. Thursday night I was continuing to feel this deep grief. And I discovered that Dr. David Domke's lecture on the election was actually being broadcast live on the Internet.⁵ I didn't know; I could attend on Whidbey Island. So I tuned in. And he told this story at the very beginning of his lecture. His family went white-water rafting. And when they hit the rapids and no one knew what to do, the guide would say, "*All forward!*" And everyone in the boat would lean forward to make it through the rapids together. "*All forward,*" David Domke said. And then he showed us some ways to step "all forward." Thank you for that.

But you know those ways, too; they are in your heart. And if you don't, there are people here who do. There are guides. They are right next to you. They are all around you. They're right here. *Sing* your hearts forward. Hold on together forward. Make a difference and be the church *forward*.

I don't know everything this moment means. I suspect rapids and deep pain and a lot of work ahead. But you are the people called to do that work. *We* are the people called to do that work. This light! This light, given to me by the grace of God, "I will let it shine." – Amen.

At the very end of his lecture Dr. Domke said this. "I don't know if you know, this is advice we give to people who are grieving." He said, "Take that phrase 'all forward' and write it down. Put it somewhere you can see it." When I was grieving the loss of my partner, someone said to me, "A broken heart will overwhelm your head. So anything you're thinking about or you need to do or you want to remember, write it down." Because while your heart is broken, you need something to see.

⁴ From United Church of Christ program "God is Still Speaking" which borrowed Gracie Allen's words, "Never place a period where God placed a comma." "The Comma reminds us to balance our rich religious past with openness to the new ideas, new people, and new possibilities of the future." For more see <http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/about/> (accessed 11/14/2016).

⁵ David S. Domke, Professor and Chair, Department of Communication, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98105

Write it down he said. "*All forward.*" Write it down, I say. *God is still speaking.* Write it down! Nothing tears apart Love. Be the church you want to see in the world.

And then at the very end of the lecture, he said to that community and to my own heart, feeling so lost it was like a shepherd had come and found me. It was! "We are who we are to one another." It's not ... It's not just you and me, right, Peter? We are who we are to each other. "Our work to reach out to the other, even the ones we can't comprehend ... especially those! Our work to reach out to one another and stay strong. *All forward,*" he said. "All forward!" And then he said, [clap] "*Let's go!*"

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