

LIVING HOPE - "COMING TOGETHER"
Ordinary Time

Luke 15:1-6

A Sermon Preached by
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University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98105
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Scripture:

Luke 15:1-6¹

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus 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 100 sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 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 shoulder and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors saying to them, "Rejoice with me for I found my sheep that was lost."

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

Grief.

Grief tore my heart when I realized that
she did not know me though
we had been soul friends for 20 years.
She thought I was Helen,
one of many who attended to her daily needs.

I was shocked to see he had gained
so much weight, was unshaven, his once
beautiful wavy hair now long and matted.
He was staring out the window
disconnected from the stories we once shared.

So many, so much disappearing
before my eyes –
values, human dignity, icebergs,
integrity,
the most vulnerable,
truth,
democracy.

Sometimes I worry when I can't remember words,
names, why I went to the kitchen, when he forgets

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

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appointments or how to interpret the manual.

It causes me to ponder the point
of meaning, loving, living.
It ignites fears that I'll get
so lost in all of the disappearing
I will forget that which is
sacred,
beautiful,
good.²

My friend Esther lives in a retirement community in Portland, Oregon, and she knows something about loss in her life.

The people – our new neighbors next-door at Tent City 3 – they have their own stories.³ They know a lot about loss.

And what about us? This room is full of our own stories of all of the ways that we are lost and disconnected from ourselves and one another. That we are lost to each other in our families, in our neighborhoods, our communities, our nation, our world. It goes on and on. We're a people that know a lot about loss.

And amidst all of our different stories, a common story this week, when day after day perhaps we watched the news while we listened to the reports and we saw the destruction of hurricane Harvey. We saw how lost people were, losing homes, losing family, losing friends, losing each other along the way. A story of loss – again. The last time I talked to him was on Sunday night. And I called up to ask how was he? I'd been thinking about him. He said, "There's three quarters of an inch of water in the apartment. My roommate and I were just staying on the beds." The phone went dead – as how many millions of phones then went dead in Houston running out of power.

Prayer:

God,
Help us find our way home lost as we are.
Help us find our way back to remember what is sacred and beautiful and good.
Help us find our way home to joy again and even joy today.
– Amen .

Well, amidst everything that changes in our lives, there are some things that never change. It was 2000 years ago and people were doing the exact same thing that people do today. They were looking at each other and they were making comments about each other.

There are sinners here and there are tax collectors here.
There are scribes and there are Pharisees here.

² Poem "Disappearing" by Esther Elizabeth ©2017 estherwelizabeth@gmail.com Poetry & Beauty to Nurture the Soul. WordPress Theme. UU2014. Accessed 9/28/17 on www.estherelizabeth.org/

³ A homeless encampment that is currently set up in the UCUC parking lot on 15th NE, Sept.-Nov.

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There are people who belong in this room.
There are people who don't belong in this room.
There are people in the in-crowd.
There are people who know we are in the out-crowd.
There are good people and there are bad people.

And human people have been doing it as long as it seems we've ever been around, dividing the world up. And of course we do it today. We have different words we put onto it, but all of the ways we describe and define each other and all of the ways we were divided from each other. We know it in our own lives. We know it in our own families and we see it throughout our nation. We are a people deeply divided from one another. And "How, how might we find our way back together?" is the question before us today.

Well, in Jesus' time and in his time of division, Jesus threw out a story. He threw out a story about a shepherd, a shepherd who had lost one of her sheep. And he asked, "Who among you, if you had a hundred sheep and one of those sheep went away, who among you wouldn't leave those 99 sheep in the wilderness and chase after that one little sheep and search and search and search until you found her and pick her up. Who among you, then, wouldn't lay her on her shoulders and bring her home and say, "Come friends and neighbors rejoice with me, for what has been lost is now found and we're restored."

Let me tell you. If I was in the crowd that day and Jesus asked that question, I would've raised my hand and said, "I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't do that, Jesus." I would count my odds instead and I'd say, "Look, I got hundred sheep; I lost one. I got to keep the 99 safe and, though I am sad that sheep got lost, I'm not going to do anything about it. It's just what happens with darn sheep." Jesus looks at me – or looks at you if you, also, would answer in that way – and said, "There's something you're missing." There's a longing at the heart of the story that you and I, perhaps, have covered over and covered up. There is a longing and a song and a hope that's keeping us from the kind of joy that Jesus wants us all to have in our lives. And it's the joy that's only found in taking the risk and doing what it takes to help find each other.

Tell me, Jesus. Tell me about that longing that I would risk everything to get back this. Tell me about that.

Last week I talked to one of our national church leaders who deals with churches in conflict all the time. And he told me that he used to get calls from churches, who were in the midst of conflict and division, asking him "Give us tools. Give us tools so we can save our church, so we can find our way back to and with one another." He said, "Today, I don't get those calls nearly as often. Instead, I get calls from churches in conflict and division from one side in that fight asking me for tools to tell them how they can win."

His insight is that the conversations we have in our church are about six months behind whatever the national conversation and news has. That doesn't bode really well for the life in our church communities in the months to come. Is there a different way? Can we find our way back to and with one another and recover that longing that we really do need each other and that doesn't need to mean "us against them."

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Well, it was another time in another time of deep conflict and division that broke out in war in our country: March 4, 1865. It was one month before the end of the Civil War. And Abraham Lincoln stood before Congress and he called the nation and he called the leaders that he worked with to this. He called them to look beyond malice, to look beyond division, "with malice toward none, with charity towards all."⁴ "With malice towards none, with charity towards all." I wonder how that speech went over? I mean you're talking to a nation that has every reason to be mad and angry at what has happened. But you know, Abraham Lincoln throughout the war, he never divided the nation between the good people and the bad people. He knew something about what Jesus us pointing us to today. There is a kind of joy to be found in all of this that is beyond our divisions.

Parker Palmer has done a lot of work in helping people listen – listen first and foremost to ourselves, listen to what he calls our souls. That's a big thing to listen to and I'm not very good at it. What's really going on with my heart? And then to step beyond that and say, how to I make room to listen what's going on in *your* heart ... and yours and yours – how can we make room, possibly, to make room for all of our souls to show up here from one another. Parker Palmer calls what Abraham Lincoln did in that kind of time of division "the politics of the broken heart" and he reminds us that the politics of the broken heart are like this.⁵ It's not about winning and losing, but it's about having our hearts broken open. It's about, yes, holding firm to our convictions but also willing to listen deeply to another and change our mind if necessary. It means this: It means not merely listening with our heads but listening to each other with all of ourselves, our whole selves, and giving to one another our attention and not merely offer our opinions. I wonder for you: Has anybody, I mean really, has anybody ever listened to you like that? And, if so, can you just remember for a moment now what that was like when someone listened to you with their whole self so your whole self could show up? Have *you* ever listened to anybody in that way?

To listen with our whole hearts means this: It means that your heart will be broken. It means that your heart will be broken because of the despair and the death and the fear and the anxiety that you will let in and fear. Getting around a broken heart is not an option if we're going to be whole hearted. But the key is this: How are our hearts broken open? We all know experiences and perhaps we know them ourselves for our hearts have been broken open into a thousand pieces – a thousand pieces because what we have heard, seen, gone through. And in those thousand pieces all we have are shards of anger and despair and disengagement. And that's true.

It's also true that we know experiences because we are sitting here today. That our hearts have been broken and they been broken open wider. And we have used the energy of grief to help us heal ourselves and reach out to one another. We have used the gifts of the dark to help us open up our eyes to see what we have been missing before and heal ourselves and offer healing to one another. The question is not *if* your heart will be broken but *how* will your heart and mind be broken open today.

I mean it has been a heart-breaking, a heart-breaking week as once again we watch all of those images from hurricane Harvey. Or perhaps we don't. Or perhaps we don't because we've been

⁴ Abraham Lincoln, concluding paragraph of his Second Inaugural Address. Reference www.bartleby.com, accessed 9/23/2017.

⁵ Parker Palmer, essay "The Politics of the Broken-Hearted: On holding the tensions of democracy." (©2014?) www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/politics-of-the-brokenhearted/ Accessed 9/23/2017.

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through and we have seen too much – so much of that pain – that we can't let another bit in. And this is true: There are those who have suffered in this hurricane whose hearts will be broken in a thousand places and they will never recover. They will make their home in anger and despair and disengagement. We will not hear their stories on the news. Their families – our families – will lose touch with them. And they will make their home there. And that is true, because we know those people and we know that part of ourselves, too.

But this is true as well – and perhaps you've seen the stories of *this* this week as well. People whose hearts are broken, who lost everything: lost homes, lost shelter, lost each other and found a space in the heartbroken space to reach out to each other. And already as they help pull each other into boats and onto life rafts already they are being healed – being healed through and in this time. That is true as well.

Yesterday afternoon I picked up the call.

"Pete. It's Pedro."

"Ah, Pedro! You're okay! I've been thinking about you all week!"

The water got up to the windowsills. His roommate and he went and found shelter in a friend's home. Now they are back and doing the long and slow work of healing and recovery and finding their lives again.

It is true: There are ways that we are lost from each other. And there is brokenness in and among each other that will never be healed – never be healed in this lifetime beyond the grace of God. And thanks be to God for that grace and that forgiveness.

And this is true as well: We can't stop there. But the invitation today is for you and me and all of us to change a story and to find in the particular relationships and connections of *your* life here and now – I mean *today* for all of us – to seek a way to connect, to hear, to have a more whole-hearted listening and hearing with and to one another, to discover in that process, what in the world Jesus is talking about. This hole that is worth recovery – despite all the fear, all the reasons it doesn't make any sense, all the reasons it's impossible – that there's something here to discover the takes *all* of us – I mean all of us – hearing and listening, breaking through all that divides us in finding out what it is we have in common. There's the work before us. There's the *hope* before us and there, Jesus says, is the joy – the joy I promise before you. Go find it, find out what that is and let's find our way back to never, ever losing track of what is beautiful and what is sacred and what is good and what can make for all this joy.

Amen.

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