



The Biggest Threat to the Church ~ Losing Its First Love
Second in the Fall sermon series "Taking Jesus Seriously"
Luke 15:1-10

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sunday, September 15th, 2019
First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois
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Text: Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost. (v. 6)

Do you know what the biggest threat to a mainline church is? It is not the spiritual but not religious. Nor is it the nones: those who do not identify with a church or religion, often because they were never exposed to a recognized faith experience. And it is not the dones; those who may have been in church but who were burned and said "never again".

No, the biggest threat to the mainline church is us, or rather "Convenient Christians". Convenient Christians follow the teachings of Jesus as long as it is convenient, as long as it does not ask too much of them, as long as it fits into their "schedule", and doesn't conflict with their plans. Theirs is a religion of "convenience."

Our baptismal font sits in the center of our chancel area or at the base of the steps. In either location it is central and visible. There are times when we are asked if it can be moved or "put away" someplace because it "is in the way." I remind people that this is a church of Jesus Christ and that our baptism ought to "get in the way" of our lives.

Last week Jesus challenged those who would take him seriously to pick up his cross. The cross is not convenient. It has a certain cost. Our baptism is not convenient. Not too long ago a Millennial said:

"If all my religion is going to change is my Sunday schedule, then I'm not interested. I want something that is going to change my finances, my social life, the way I work, the way I treat my family, the way that I treat others, and the way I use my time."

The much sought after Gen Xers and Millennials are not interested in institutional survival for the sake of institutional survival. They were raised in the midst of uncertainty and change. They know the pain of being raised in the midst of divorce. They came of age in a time of stockholder priority and downsizing. They want to do something now. They want to make a difference now. They want to change lives now. So did and does Jesus.

The apostle Paul said the Church is the Body of Christ on earth. If we accept that to be true, then as the Body of Christ our purpose or ministry coincides with Jesus' ministry. At the heart of his ministry was seeking the lost--those who are outside of the community of faith. He said as much a little later in Luke's gospel: *The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost* (19: 10)

Today's parables are two of three parables that Jesus used in response to the Pharisees and scribes criticism of the company he kept. The first is that of the lost sheep. The shepherd goes in search of one lost sheep out of a flock of 99. "Whom among you, if they had a hundred sheep and discovered one lost would not go out and search for that one lost sheep. And when that lost sheep was found, would not rejoice. So it is with God who rejoices over one lost sinner.

Now, the foolishness of this parable escapes our modern ears because we have romanticized the parable and froze it in stained glass windows and paintings. But no shepherd would leave the 99 in order to find the one lost sheep because when he returned he would find that the 99 left behind would most likely have scattered to the four winds. But that is the point, God's extravagance, God's foolishness is such that he seeks the lost even at the cost of the many!

The second parable is similar. A woman with ten coins loses one. Upon discovery of losing one of the ten coins she searches the house high and low until she finds the coin. Now one has to wonder what made the coin so valuable to her? Some commentators suggest that the lost coin, the tenth coin was important for her dowry she needed ten coins for that dowry. Another commentator looked at the parable for a deeper meaning. The coin--each coin--bore an image, the image of Caesar. You may recall that when the same crowd was trying to trap Jesus by asking him if it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, Jesus asked for a coin. He then asked whose image was on the coin. "Caesar's," he was told. "Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.

In the first chapter of Genesis we are told that God created humanity in the divine image. Each one of us bears the stamp of God's image. In the parable of the lost coin the woman, standing in for God, searches for the lost coin--lost people--because like the Pharisee and scribes and each and every one of us the image of God, our owner, is stamped.

Gordon and Gladis DePree wrote in one of their free verse poems,

*"Recognizing the stranger
As a face of God
Takes so much of the suspicion and hostility
Out of life ...
Somehow viewing the stranger as a face of God
Changes him as well as me.
For if I have seen God in him,
How can he see less in himself?"*

The health of the church, big C and little c church, is found in how well they live out their calling as the Body of Christ. In one of his letters the apostle Paul encouraged a Christian community to imitate in so far as they see him imitating Christ. We promise to be living examples of Christian behavior every time we baptize a child. We live into our baptism in essentially three ways; Lifestyle, Relationships, and Invitation.

LIFESTYLE

When I graduated from seminary, the seminary's president C. Ellis Nelson said something that has stuck with me throughout the years. He said that Jesus did and want and the church does not need "secret agents", "underground" Christians. People look and listen to what we say and do. We need to be aware of that. As it has been said, actions speak louder than words.

RELATIONSHIPS

The way in which we fellowship and work together speaks to the world. Fellowship was one of the hallmarks of the early church. Small groups and social functions are important to our spiritual health. Reaching out to the community, not just as individuals but as a faith community is important in telling the story of Jesus.

This was brought home to me when I visited our overseas partners in East Africa. Once a month in each of their homes for street boys in transition, the home goes out into the community as a group for a service project. It may be by cleaning the community cistern or picking up litter or doing needed repairs. The community sees the boys working together, laughing together, and making one little corner of the world better and they want to "be like them."

The earliest Christians, in times of plague, were the ones who stayed behind, even at the risk of their own lives to care for the sick and dying, to bury the dead, all the while praising God.

INVITATIONAL

Study after study has shown that 90% of people who first visit a church do so because someone they know invited them. The invite is simple. "Do you have a church home? We're open Sundays at 8 & 10."

If you say that all of your friends already go to church, expand your circle of friends. As one of my grandchildren asked me not too long ago as we were driving to church, "Why are there so many cars parked in front of houses and in driveways? Doesn't everyone go to church?"

Sadly the answer is "no".

Jesus once said that whoever wishes to save their life will lose it, but whoever is willing to lose their life for him and the gospel's sake will find it. There is a cost to discipleship, to taking Jesus seriously. The question is: Are you willing to pay it? Are We willing to pay it?