

Lost and Found

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The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

September 11, 2022

I Timothy 1:12-17 and Luke 15:1-10

Today is a significant day in our life together. So much is happening, as you might have noticed. Some churches call it Rally Day. Some Kickoff Sunday. Homecoming works well as well, so welcome to this Homecoming Sunday, the first Sunday after Labor Day when things begin to take off. Sunday school. Youth. Welcome back choir! I do hope you will stay for the picnic – moved indoors to keep us dry but no less fun. Outstanding food; lots of deviled eggs. Activities for the kids. Thanks to those who set-up; if you can stay a bit at the end and help with clean-up, that would be great.

After what is called a “soft opening” last Sunday, we are very glad to fully and formally welcome Jeffrey DeVault as our organist and associate director of music. You have read about Jeff and his distinguished career to this point. We are grateful to welcome Jeff’s gifts and commitments to this place. Jeff – welcome!

Topping Jeff’s two weeks by some 49 years plus is a distinguished company of people who have been members of this congregation for 50 years or more. Their names are listed in the bulletin, as it is our custom to recognize them on this Sunday. Their commitments to the ministry of this place over these decades are exemplary and invaluable. Please do greet them at the picnic following, but may I ask them to stand now so that we may properly recognize them...

And finally...for all the hope and joy of this day, there is a solemnity that is important to mark. Twenty-one years can seem both a lifetime and an instant, and this day, twenty-one years after events in NYC and DC and to the west of us in Shanksville, feels like both. We sang a great hymn to begin our time together, including words about God – “light inaccessible.” At the end of this sermon, you will be invited to come forward, receive a candle from an usher, light it, and place it, alongside the candles of others, in a container on this table. “Light inaccessible” to be sure, this light reminding us of that light, light that does many things. Light

illuminates and gives warmth, and perhaps this light will do both. We remember all those who died 21 years ago, and those who yet grieve. We remember all those who offered aid – it seems that’s when the term “first responder” first came into common parlance, police, firefighters, EMT’s and so many others who sacrificed. We remember every young person who has been born and raised in this era, who have only known a post September 11 world with heightened security everywhere and heightened other things.

So we remember those events this morning as we light our candles. But time has not stood still since then, and so we remember other things as well. These candles can represent what they need to represent for you. Births and deaths. Good moments and not so good ones. People who died from COVID and all who cared for them, and us. Our conflicted nation. Our conflicted world. Ukraine. Uvalde. Buffalo. Highland Park. Memphis. Saskatchewan. Philadelphia. As we light our candles, and join our light with others, perhaps that can be a moment of recommitment on a morning of recommitment to share light, to embrace light, to reflect light, to be light. It is important to remember. It is important to embrace hope.

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I needn’t remind you that COVID is not fully over, though it feels like we are in a new place with it. And I needn’t remind you of the many ways our city, our nation, our world, still live in the throes of conflict and division, not to mention a rapidly ramping up election season.

So here we are. Some masked. Some not. Some have returned. Some not. Around here we are trying some new things, and some new old things. The fluidity and unpredictability, really since March 15 of 2020, remains a constant, an ever-evolving constant.

Susan Beaumont is a church consultant, and a wise one. Allow me to read a bit of an extended portion of a recent article. It’s a little nerdy/geeky, and also worth a bit of attention. Beaumont writes:

“There is good reason to be optimistic about the start of this program year. People are back from a summer of traveling and reconnecting with loved ones. Staff are rested and brimming with new ideas. Many children have been vaccinated, and a more predictable school year seems likely. We are coming out

of pandemic mayhem. However, a more robust start up to the new program year is not a signal that we have arrived at “the” new normal. We are still in a liminal season—and need to lead accordingly.

Liminal seasons have three distinct phases:

1. **Separation:** A period in which order is stripped away from organizational structures, practices, and identity. The old way stops working.
2. **Liminal Period:** A disorienting period of non-structure that opens new possibilities. New identities are explored, and new possibilities are considered.
3. **Reorientation:** A re-forming period, in which new structures and practices emerge that are better suited to an emerging identity.”

Beaumont continues: “It is tempting to believe that we completed the whole liminal cycle during the pandemic, and that we are ready for reorientation now.

Remember, this liminal season began well before the pandemic arrived and it is driven by other disorienting forces. We are amidst a climate crisis, a racial justice reckoning, political polarization and a host of other factors causing institutions to deconstruct and reorient. We are living through a cultural transformation, the outcome of which is still unknowable.

This does not mean we can’t be energized and hopeful. There is much to be excited about. At the same time, we cannot naively return to the old ways of being church. This is a season that calls for ongoing disturbance, continued innovation, and the discovery of new coherence.”

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We know that, I think, even though there are times we – I – seek that naïve return to the old ways. I wonder, however, how we can innovate. How can we try new things? How can we be gentle with each other, remembering that we are still in the midst of significant trauma and grief? We will explore all of this more fully this

Thursday at our forum – join us live or watch later on. And we will explore this in more particular ways next Sunday after church as I share my learning and experiences from all of these church visits I did this past summer.

One way to become re-oriented, after being oriented and then disoriented, is to go back to our roots. To return to the core foundations of our faith. The hymns. The prayers. The word. What does scripture have to say to us right now, because if it doesn't have anything to say, either there is something wrong with it or the ways we are engaging it. But it does. It does, not in some "if we just lived by traditional biblical principles everything will be OK" approach, but more so "if we engage this word together we will find hope as we seek to navigate this present moment as faithfully as we can."

It could be profitable to review the epistle lesson from I Timothy sometime soon, perhaps during halftime of the Eagles game this afternoon as we speculate whether Jalen Hurts is the best quarterback ever or the worst quarterback ever, or, as I surmise, somewhere in between. Paul in I Timothy writes of God's radical acceptance. If God's grace can accept even him, Paul writes, then who would it not welcome. Radical acceptance – that is who God is, and that is who God is toward us. Perhaps our deepest theological root, our absolute core faith principle. Grace, we call it. Mercy, we call it. It is amazing, and more than amazing. Our call is to accept that acceptance, to welcome that welcome, and then, and then, to share it, in all of the ways that are obvious and less so. That is to say, if we are welcome, why isn't everyone. And if everyone is welcome, what am I doing to make that the case?

Jesus shows us what that looks like, that core belief, that core practice, and he tells us what it looks like. There are two sets of hearers he is speaking to when he collects himself to speak this morning: the tax collectors and sinners, those whom society says is lost, and the Pharisees and the scribes, those who think they could never be lost, ever. He speaks to both audiences, those who know they need grace (but to whom society is stingy in offering) and those who think they would never need grace because they have the holiness thing pretty well nailed down and buttoned up (but who we understand perhaps need it the most). He speaks to two audiences, and perhaps we find ourselves in one, or the other, or both, or shifting back and forth, ebbing and flowing. He tells them two quick stories,

profound stories that upset conventional wisdom, profound stories that recalibrate our understandings about who's in and who's out and who God is.

A shepherd has 100 sheep. He loses one of them. The shepherd loses the sheep, note, not that the sheep gets lost. And the shepherd, rather than writing off the lost sheep simply as CDB, the cost of doing business, pursues, goes after it. It's a questionable business practice, an inefficient use of time and labor. Still, that's who this shepherd is and that's what this shepherd does. When the sheep is found, the shepherd rejoices – how lovely – and then announces this good news to the community.

Then another quick story, a woman this time, paired with the male shepherd, has ten coins. She loses one, and rather than being satisfied with what she has, again, a question of efficiency and use of resources, she lights a lamp – like we will do in a few moments – and searches “carefully,” we are told, until she finds it. After finding it, she does the same things. First, she rejoices and then she tells her friends, the community, all about it.

These two stories are set within the context of repentance – one sinner who repents, Jesus says, is more momentous than the ninety-nine who need no repentance. Being lost, a sheep, a coin, a person, can look like a lot of things. We have narrowed it to one thing – accepting Jesus as Lord in order to ensure our eternal salvation. And believe me, I believe that knowing Jesus more deeply, living by his precepts more fully, emulating his life more completely, is the vision we are called to pursue. But think of those audiences – from what did a tax collector need to repent? From what did a sinner need to repent? From what did a scribe, or a Pharisee – those who presumably had their faith together pretty solidly – from what did they need to repent? My hunch is that repentance message was harder for them to receive, to internalize, than it was for others.

Even so, it begs the question, from what do we need to repent, you and me? A belief? A behavior? And what does it mean for us – each of us, all of us – to know that Jesus is pursuing us, tracking us down in whatever crag that has entrapped us, lighting a candle and looking for us in the deepest recesses of that metaphorical sofa that swallows every lost coin, or for me, that lies right in that space of the car seat that my hand can never quite reach. That's what Jesus does for us. That's who God is. Sometimes we know we are lost. Sometimes we don't

know. Sometimes we're lost and don't know it. Every time, God pursues us, seeks us out, and rejoices when that same God – like a shepherd, like a woman with a lamp – finds us.

Chelsey Harmon writes that “(These stories) are the implicit expression of the very values of God towards God’s people: equality, inclusion, no hierarchy of accessibility...”

Kenneth Bailey reminds us that in these parables, “God searches without counting the cost” and God “rejoices with the community at the success of restoration.”

This is a message to the lost and those who think they never could be lost, and those of us in between.

Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian writer who influenced so many, died last month at the age of 96. Buechner wrote: “God is the comic shepherd who gets more of a kick out of that one lost sheep once he finds it again than out of the ninety and nine who had the good sense not to get lost in the first place. God is the eccentric host who, when the country-club crowd all turned out to have other things more important to do than come live it up with him, goes out into the skid rows and soup kitchens and charity wards and brings home a freak show. The man with no legs who sells shoelaces at the corner. The old woman in the moth-eaten fur coat who makes her daily rounds of the garbage cans...the village idiot who stands at the blinker light waving his hand as the cars go by. They are seated at the damask-laid table in the great hall. The candles are all lit and the champagne glasses filled. At a sign from the host, the musicians in their gallery strike up ‘Amazing Grace.’”

Our call is simple. To know when we need the invitation, and to accept it. And to seek those who need it, and extend it. Accept and extend. In this season, and every season. To light the candles, and to sing with hope. Amen.