

Getting Lost
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 15, 2013
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Texts: Jeremiah 4
I Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

When I think about the gospel text, my first impulse is pride. I am so proud of Hope Church for being a welcoming congregation. Look ... it says so right there on page two of the bulletin! “Hope Church welcomes everyone without exception. We are an open community, and the table is open.” We are doing what Jesus says and we rejoice and even take some pride in our identity as a welcoming congregation.

This summer when Hope Church had the tent at the Pride celebration in Centennial Park, some of the people who staffed the booth later rejoiced in the results. A couple of people had visited Hope Church as a result of our presence.

And today we sang “Gather us in, the lost and forsaken; gather us in, the blind and the lame.” And then even more explicitly, we sang about God’s love having room for all. All of this makes me so proud to be a member of Hope Church.

And as a preacher, I’ve found such openness here. This is a thoughtful, open-minded church and questions and challenging ideas are welcome here.

So I'm tempted to say, "keep doing what you are doing," and sit down. Unfortunately, usually when the Bible prompts us to pride and self-congratulation, there is a good chance that we are missing something; or someone.

Several months ago I was in a meeting of the Young Adult Task Force. We have been thinking about ways we could care for young adults in the community, and our attention naturally went to Hope College students. But at one point in the conversation, Pastor Gordon asked a question that has stayed with me. "What about other young adults in the community? What about the 20 year old who is working in a factory or at Burger King? What about the young adults who were not raised in the church and have no interest in religion? What about the young adults who might want to go to college but don't have the money? Is there anything Hope Church can do to care for them?"

This reminded me that a church can be welcoming on paper and in their music, but the reality is more complicated. It is not easy to be genuinely welcoming to everyone. It isn't even that we don't want to be. But we don't always know how.

So here is a question to consider. Who is not sitting at our table?

The Pharisees and scribes in this story were the people who did religion right. They took their faith seriously. They studied Scripture. They lived good lives. They tried to avoid evil and do the right thing. They worshipped regularly. They were pure. And they were

very dubious about Jesus because he broke so many rules. Especially in the company he kept.

Jesus seemed to attract the undesirables. Luke calls them the tax collectors and sinners. These folks would have been exactly the opposite of the well behaved Pharisees. The tax collectors worked for the Roman government and they were despised. And “sinners” was a broad term that could include almost anybody who did not keep all the strict laws the way the Pharisees did. If you ate the wrong food, or hung out with the wrong people, or had the wrong job, and made bad choices about your sexuality, you were a sinner.

The Pharisees thought they were honoring their religious commitments when they made these judgments about people. For centuries they had been told to avoid people who did not share their beliefs. If you hung out with bad people, you would become bad yourself.

They get criticized for that, but don't we do the same thing? We would prefer our teenagers to avoid the parties with the drugs and alcohol present. We would prefer they not spend time with the kids who engage in risky behavior. The bad choices of others might influence them.

So the Pharisees had a point, really. And yet Jesus didn't seem to care much about maintaining purity and avoiding the appearance of evil. Those tax collectors and sinners were drawn to his message, and they were coming near to hear more about it and to get to know this Jesus fellow who seemed so different from most of the religious people they

knew. And he didn't just offer helpful spiritual advice while maintaining a healthy distance. He actually sat down to meals with these people who ate the wrong things and did not wash their hands correctly.

And the Pharisees and scribes grumbled. Jesus should not be so welcoming. He should not let those people get so close to him. In response to these complaints, Jesus told three stories. A shepherd lost one of his hundred sheep, and went to look for it. He was so happy when he found it, that he threw a party. A woman lost a coin, and swept the house until she found it. Then she threw a party. And in the story which follows, a son ran away from home, and when he finally came home, his father threw a party. Each of these stories is presenting a picture of God, who loves and searches for the lost, and parties so extravagantly when they are found. But the Pharisees and the scribes and the older brother did not want to party. They wanted to grumble.

The grumblers would not have thought of themselves as lost. They probably grew up in the faith. They received a solid religious education. Perhaps they never struggled with their faith. They always felt welcomed in the synagogue. They had never done anything seriously wrong. Never made a mess out of their lives.

I wonder if that is true for some of us here. We've always felt a part of the church and the community. We grew up in the church. Our parents nurtured us in faith. We may have had some questions and doubts, but on the whole, we've had stable lives without much drama and brokenness. It is hard to see ourselves as lost.

But we are.

Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love.

We are part of a broken world and broken humanity. Jeremiah described the broken world he saw as a reversal of creation. The wind or breath of God had blown on the waters and brought order out of chaos, but now a hot wind is tearing the world apart. The fertile land has become a desert. The cities are in ruins. These are powerful images of a world that is lost. “My people are foolish,” God said in the Jeremiah text. “They are stupid children. They have no understanding.”

The Apostle Paul didn't really think that he was lost. He lived a committed life as a Pharisee. So committed that he persecuted Christians for their faith. He thought he was on the right path, until he had a dramatic conversion experience, and the grace of God overflowed for him.

There are many ways to be lost. Sometimes we are lost in a big way. Crime or addiction, or a big failure. But usually we are lost in less dramatic. We can lose someone important to us. We can get sick. We might find that our life is absolutely not what we hoped it would be. We feel desperately lonely and broken and disappointed. And all of that is a kind of lost that needs to be found and transformed by the overflowing grace of God.

I started a novel this week in which one of the characters is a 28 year old woman named Ruby. A comedian, but not a very successful one. She has just been fired from her waitressing job because she forgot to show up for a shift. She is angry and bitter. Her agent said, “You’ve got that great smile and you are very funny, but I haven’t seen that smile in years. You’re lost.”

It’s not easy to admit.

When we see ourselves as lost sheep and lost coins in need of finding, when we see ourselves as broken people needing the overflowing grace of God, when we sing honestly, “prone to wander, Lord I feel it,” *Then* we are much more likely to see and experience and notice the God who seeks and who sweeps in search of us. We are more likely to be grateful. More likely to rejoice; more likely to welcome others.

How have you been found? There are many ways to be found. It might be that you came to know Jesus as your personal savior. But it might be that you felt known, or understood, or affirmed, or cared for, or valued.

How have you experienced God’s welcome? How have you felt God’s overflowing grace?

Last night I was poking around on Facebook when I should have been working on my sermon, some friends had posted pictures of their son’s same sex wedding. In one of the

pictures, the families and all the other guests were gathered around the men getting married, much like when we ordain elders and deacons. They were offering prayers and blessings for their marriage. And in the middle of that group were the grandparents, who in the past would have had “issues” with gay marriage. But there they were, participating in the blessing. It was a sign to me of God’s overflowing grace.

Let’s keep asking ... who is missing? Who needs to be welcomed? Maybe it is people who have a different skin color. Maybe it is people who don’t have as much education. Maybe it is people who don’t have as much money.

Who is missing? And how can we participate with God in searching and sweeping?
How can we share in God’s overflowing grace? So that everyone is welcome? Amen.