September 15th , 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Ordinary Time

10:30 am

Incomplete

1. Presbytery & Greek

As I was sitting and listening to the sermon at the Baltimore Presbytery Gathering this last Thursday, Rev. Mary of St. John’s United was preaching about the same text that we have heard today. When I first had read the text, a text that is so familiar – one of a lost sheep, another of a lost coin, it rang familiar and perhaps stale.

Because, if you skim the reading, what is just another lost sheep? In our world, what is a lost penny on the ground? It might be a bummer, but you can buy another sheep. Chances are, you’ll someday find that penny or someone else will – but you’ll probably forget about the lost penny by the end of the day. All these lost things? Is it really a big deal?

But then Pastor Mary brought the heat. I had been reading the word ‘lost’ wrong all this time. She shared that the word ‘lost’ from the original greek, *allollumi,* didn’t simply mean lost. It actually really isn’t even near the English word ‘lost’ – it is a heavy word that means ‘to destroy, to kill, to be put to death, to abolish, to render useless.’

And as I sat there in my chair with a bunch of other Presbyterians, I recognized that this metaphor was much more impactful than before. That lost sheep makes the fold incomplete. The lost sheep isn’t simply lost...it is rendered useless, it’s very identity is destroyed, it’s completely and utterly useless. And all the sudden, that lost sheep becomes more important, it goes from a shrug of ‘eh, lost a sheep’ to ‘this grief is deep and wide, because we’ve lost part of the fold and we are incomplete.’

1. What does it mean to be incomplete

I started to think about the body of Christ, as in, all the people and creatures that

roam this planet. It is easier, or perhaps less intense to say, ‘we lost someone today’ or ‘we lost out on an experience’ than ‘this person has been seen as useless’ or ‘this person has been destroyed.’ Gravity. There’s gravity to these words.

If we are not one united body, if we are not one people filled with diversity, if we do not care for our neighbor, we are and will continue to be incomplete. And, perhaps the sad recognition that we need to make as a family of faith is...we will always be incomplete. And there is space and room for that in this life, because God’s Kingdom has and has not come. And so we mourn that, we grieve that, that there will always be a ‘lost sheep’ or ‘lost coin’ – and that a world of perfect unity does not dwell within us our around us.

And so, let the jaggedness of that lost and incompleteness sit with you – let it feel uncomfortable, let it tear you at the seams, let it cause you to think and to wonder and to mourn at a world where injustice and oppression and people who live on the margins is a reality. Here in Baltimore. Here in America. Here in this world. Let it break your heart.

1. And then what

If your heart is broken, your heart is in the right place. Good. What will you do with that incompleteness that exists around us? Do we pray that it is fixed?

I’ve often heard the phrase, “When I pray, God doesn’t answer.” And I hear that, I acknowledge that woundedness that I have felt myself in prayer. And then I back up and I remember the words that Mother Teresa coined, she said, “I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us, and we change things.” It’s a firm reality, a striking reality that we need to remember over and over again: God is not a fairy Godmother, a fix-it handyman, and there are no quick fixes to this life. It is in and through prayer that we are changed, and again, as Mother Teresa said, these prayers change us and change how we participate in the world.

So, we do pray that this world of brokenness be healed into a world that is more complete, but we acknowledge that we are the ones called to envision and act upon that call that God has put upon our hearts.

Will our prayers heal all this incompleteness? No. But through being with one another in love, by welcoming the stranger, by searching for the lost, by holding the hand of the grieving one, by feeding the hungry – we, step by step, are doing the work of Christ in making this world a more compelling image of what God’s world is called to be. This is our call. Our call is not to heal all incompleteness, we cannot save every sheep, we cannot find any coin – but we can take the call seriously. We can say that we will not just let people slip through the cracks and be unaffected. We will put our heart and head together and begin by doing the righteous work that Christ calls us to, by imparting the love that has first been shown to us.

IV. Shepherding One Another

Another part of this text occurs to me, one that I often make assumptions on – I assume that we are part of the 99, that we are the elite, that we are the ones that are safe. But if I sit and wrestle with the text, I recognize that I’ve been a lost sheep and I’ve felt like the lost coin, lost amid the cracks.

And I don’t think I stand alone in that feeling. I imagine that at one point or another, someone had to find you in your loneliness, in your lost-ness, and bring you back into the fold.

I can remember what seems like a benign example, but it still sticks in my memory like a polaroid photo till this day. I transitioned from a small private school where 25 peers where in my class in middle school into a large public high school. On the first day of school, I was completely overwhelmed, and the bell rang and I stood before this foreign locker that I didn’t know how to open. All the other kids who went to the public middle school already dealt with learning how to open their lockers. I stood in front of my new locker, Freshman year, and I cried, the hallways were empty, the bell had hung, and I was alone. I was probably alone for all of three minutes, but it felt more like fifteen. And out of nowhere, the Principal came up to me, and now I’m petrified of getting in trouble, and with kindness, he asked me why I was here. I explained I couldn’t open my locker, it was my first day, I just came here, and he taught me how to open my locker and was calm and cool. I remember the principal, Dr. Staryak, helping me to not feel so alone in this new environment. Like a shepherd’s crook around my neck, he pulled me back into the fold and helped me get back to class and back on my feet.

1. Called to Completeness

Maybe that seems like a small gesture and I doubt he would remember it, but I do. And

the point is, people remember when you help them, when you guide them, when you act in loving service to let them feel more complete and more at home. You may not know the power of your hospitality, but they do.

So, we may not make this world complete, but we do have a part to play. May you never think your actions are small, may you take a part in this unifying action, and may everything you say and do be to the glory of God. Alleluia. Amen.