

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, September 16, 2007

Sermon Text: Luke 15:1-10

Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I always like a good dog story, and I think this is a good dog story. A lost and found ad was placed in a paper once, which read “Lost one dog, brown hair with several bald spots, has three legs, a bent tail, right eye missing, left ear bitten off, answers to the name Lucky.” You’ve heard that before. We laugh at that because of the irony.

Think on this irony. The people we think of as lucky in our culture are the rich and the famous and the superstars. Very, very often they end up wounded and bent and broken and lost and alone. Today’s superstars become tomorrow’s jokes. Still, we follow their lives, these world-worn, floating wrecks as if they have arrived. You can be rich and famous, and be lost and alone. You can have everything you always thought you needed to be happy, and be lost and alone.

Speaking of lost, isn’t it odd that when you’re looking for something, it’s always in the last place you look? No, that’s not odd. There’s nothing odd about that. Of course, it’s in the last place you look! When you find it, the search is over. You stop looking. It’s the end.

A conference I attended last week spoke about our need to seek the seekers who are looking for God, who have a hunger for meaning in their lives, but the church is the last place many of them would think to look. This is what they said. Especially high steeple or high tower, downtown, traditional looking churches, like us. What once was strength seems now to be a weakness. This is what the experts said. Seekers, disappointed and disillusioned with worldly pursuits and self-centered lives, look for places that break the mold, and to them we seem, well, moldy. One of us, one of you, not necessarily staff or pastor or committee head has the next great idea for our mission in ministry and outreach. Who knows who God might inspire to help us break the mold and realize the potential that this sleeping giant certainly has? It hurt me to hear that many people who feel lost and alone consider traditional churches like ours the last place to look. It makes me sad that folks feel that way. It makes me even sadder that some of us have never, ever invited one seeking person here! Now, don’t get me wrong. There is no plan to water down what we believe in order to be attractive to people who don’t know what they believe. That’s a losing proposition on both ends. One, we would cease to be who we are, and two, watered down beliefs offer nothing to a serious seeker.

No, honoring the seeker does not mean that we water down 2,000 years of Scripture and proclamation, in fact, theologian Paul Tillich said that our job is to proclaim the Gospel message so clearly that it creates a crisis, a need to decide. Do I believe this or not? Our message needs to be consistent. Even when we don’t feel like it, whosoever will come seeking God, responding to the hope offered in Jesus Christ, whosoever will come will be welcomed and greeted and presented the crisis of the living Gospel, and if they say yes,

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then incorporated into the family of God residing at Main Street United Methodist Church. Either that, or we take down our signs!

What about those of us who've spent our whole lives in church, and prayed and tithed and preached and witnessed and worked in homeless shelters and been overseas on missions, and yet somehow feel that God hasn't found us yet? In our area, it seems to me that old folk theology oddly is converging with new age spirituality. What folk theology and generic spirituality have in common is that both speak about finding, about us doing the finding.

Jesus, in these two teaching parables today, turned that on its head. He says, He speaks about God finding, about God seeking, and about God rejoicing. I think if you dropped a 25-cent coin, and still had nine, you might not, if it's at night, you might not light a light and sweep the house and turn it upside down to find it. You might say, I still have nine. You might not search that way, but God would. If you lost one sheep, but you still had 99 secure, you might not leave the 99 in the wilderness by themselves just to go find the one. You might not, but God would. What father in the next parable in that reading would watch for and embrace the son, that son who said let's pretend that you are dead, and give me my inheritance now, and then he wastes it, and then he comes home filthy and ragged. You might tolerate his return, but which of you would kill the fatted calf and throw party? You probably wouldn't, but God would.

You see the theme? God is not like us, and that is a good thing. That is a very good thing. God knows nothing of cost-benefit analysis. God knows love and grace and forgiveness and redemption. We, in these stories, are pictured as the passively, clueless wandering sheep or the insensate coin. Both have value, but neither the sheep nor the coin have any idea that they are lost! The parables paint a picture where God seeks, God finds, God celebrates.

Henry Nouwen tells the story of an old man, who used to meditate early every morning under a big tree on the bank of the Ganges River in India. One morning after he had finished his meditation, he saw a scorpion floating helplessly in the water. As the scorpion was washed closer to the tree, the old man reached out to rescue the drowning insect. As soon as he touched it, however, the scorpion did what scorpions do. It stung him. Instinctively, the man withdrew his hand, but a minute later, he tried again. This time the scorpion stung him so badly with its poisonous tail that his hand instantly became swollen and bloody, and his face contorted with pain. At that moment, a passerby saw what was going on, and he shouted, “Hey, stupid old man, what's wrong with you? Only a fool would risk his life to save such an ugly, evil creature! Don't you know you could kill yourself trying to save that ungrateful scorpion?” Looking into the stranger's eyes, the old man said calmly, “My friend, just because it is in the scorpion's nature to sting does not change my nature to save.”

The cross reveals God's nature to save, God's depth of desire to save, God's love, which does not count the cost. So much of the work of the modern seeker or the old-fashioned

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bumper sticker proclaiming, “I found it!” You remember the bumper stick that said, “I found it!” You may have had one. Don’t raise your hand because I’m not going to say anything good about it. No, you didn’t! You didn’t find it! God found you.

I mean it this way. God put the hunger in your heart to search. You probably, as all of us do, fed it with spiritual junk food and things and thrills, and you still felt empty. God put that hunger in your soul. Wesley called it prevenient grace, and in Hymn 561 in our hymnal, Charles Wesley described it this way. Loadstone means magnet. Touched by the loadstone, or touched by the magnet of thy love, let all our hearts agree and ever toward each other move, and ever move toward thee. We are to move toward God and toward each other. The magnet of God’s grace, the spiritual hunger, which is a gift from God he has given us.

We’re supposed to move toward each other. You know some of us find it a lot easier to move toward God, and we leave out the each other part. That each other part is hard because we do not all like each other’s habits and mannerisms and annoying tendencies. We don’t, but bound in Christ and together in God’s families, we got to love each other, and love trumps like. I can give you an example if you don’t agree, and you will as soon as I finish. Do you love your family? Your mom, your dad, your grandparents, your aunts, your uncles, your brothers, your sisters? Do you love them? You can shake your head yes. You love them. Do you like them all the time? N-n-noo. Well, then you got it. You understand.

Tillich and our general conference experts say not to water down how we got to be found in family together. God came in Jesus Christ to seek out and to save the lost. How is that for a crisis? Can you believe that? God came looking for you, pulling for you, not sitting back as a solemn judge waiting for you to mess up and get out of line and give you a cosmic whack on the head. No. God came in us. God came to us in Jesus Christ, and came in this moment, continues to come in this moment through the Holy Spirit urging us and wooing us and working on our hearts to turn, to turn away from self-centered life and turn toward a God-centered life. That’s all that repentance means, to turn to God. It doesn’t mean I’m sorry and keep on going away from God. It means to turn away from what you’re doing that leads you away from God, away from each other, and to turn back to God. It literally means a “U-turn.”

I once in my first church preached the corniest sermon you’ve ever heard entitled “God’s U-turn” playing off the Greek word metanoia. Turn. The same God who has us turn toward Him always when we do, when we enter into His embrace, the very next thing is okay, sends us out to others. Wouldn’t this faith of ours be easier if it weren’t for other people? It would, wouldn’t it? John Wesley said that it’s a social religion though. It must be lived out in community with other people. John Wesley had no real respect or admiration for the desert fathers who prayed and read Scripture out in a cave alone by themselves. He essentially said in his proper English, “It’s easy to be a Christian if there ain’t no people around.” Oscar Wilde said, “Hell is other people.”

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No, our faith requires us, God expects us to reach out to other people, outside there and inside here, weeping with those who weep, rejoicing with those who rejoice, and praying for and seeking the good of others. Solitary belief and solitary worship and solitary faith that touches no one and shares with no one and invites no one and encourages no one is not faith at all. If you get brave and get inspired to invite as we are called to, it should go something like this, something like this. As you speak to someone who seems to need what the church can provide, you could say, “You seem to feel alone. Come see the family that God is growing at Main Street. Come see the family that God is growing here. We’re not all perfect, but we do all believe and rejoice in God’s love for us and God’s love for you.”

I’ll bet somewhere along the line, somehow each of us, who now feel found in Christ, each of us in this family of God, we somewhere got the message that there is an empty place inside of us, and nothing but God would fill it. So when we invite others, we can say, “Come live with God here. Come grow with God here, and with God’s people.” Explain how God has filled that empty place in your heart. Some imperfect people, some incomplete people are struggling to grow in God’s grace over here at Main Street church, come join us! We offer honest struggle, working out our faith together, the grace and the power and the growth comes from God. The love comes from God. The eternal hope comes from God. Don’t worry. The strength to love this odd mixture of people also comes from God. We never must come across as reaching down to lift people up. We are always reaching out to bring people in. To be a winsome inviting church, we need to lead with how the Gospel has impacted our life and how God has led you from faith to deeper faith, how God has led you to be less in love with self and selfish desires and more generous and compassionate with others and more peaceful in God’s presence and prayer and more forgiving. If God hasn’t, and you can’t say that, then it is time to pray.

Many of you have heard so much and read so much about the Natural Church Development Survey that you may be sick of it, but there’s more coming. We are weak in evangelism the survey says. Inviting and welcoming and incorporating others into our church family. We can fix that if we see clearly who we are and who God is and how vital it is to find new ways and new attitudes about reaching out, not down, to others. With our faith stories of what God is doing in my life, what God is doing in my Sunday School class, in my prison ministry circle, in our youth group, in our mission event, in my marriage, in my family, in my addictions. You see people don’t just stumble upon the secret of the Gospel. They see it in the light of your eyes, a warmth in your welcome, a sincerity in your service, and the joy and the praise in your worship. The ultimate test of our faith is how much we care about those who are lost and alone and wandering out there.

I had a couple in my very first church. You’ve heard some horror stories about Hardeeville. This is not a horror story. It’s an interesting story. They were in their 80s when I met them over 25, well, about 25 years ago. Their name was the Rogenbergs. They had escaped from the Nazis in Norway during World War II, and they lived for a time, decades, in South America, and then they lived decades in the Low Country, the

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very lowest of the Low Country, Hardeeville. Now, when I met them, they had acquired the perfect storm of three accents – Norwegian, Brazilian, and Low Country South Carolina. It was almost impossible for me to understand them. I remember they had a great-grandson born, and I said, “What’s his name?” They said, “Yan Yuk!” I said, “I’m sorry?” They said, “Yan Yuk in the Bible, Yan Yuk!” John Luke. I finally got it. I’ll never forget a day when I was over there, and we heard on the radio in the background about a plane crash, and over 100 people had died. It broke Mrs. Rogenberg’s heart. Whatever your theology may be, and whatever God’s reality may be, beyond all of our theology, she felt pain in her heart wondering did any of them almost, but not quite have faith. She wondered if they had never cried out to God. Did they have time? She hoped and prayed, almost in tears, that they had time. She had concern for the lost or the potential lost, and it deeply touched me. Now, I know that some of you who tend toward a universalism in your theology might think that would be the perfect time to give her a lecture, but if you had been there, I promise you, you would not have done that. Her love, her concern for those she worried could be lost from God was so genuine and so sincere and so rare.

We say we believe that God in Christ has something to offer, that sin is real, that salvation, that wholeness and redemption is real and that a life connected with God and God’s love, forgiveness and grace is real. Knowing that and believing that and knowing that some others do not know or do not believe or have not seen the reality of it practiced in their whole lives, how can we sit comfortably when there are empty pews? What makes us think that God secretly sent His son for us and not for others? These parables say to me that God’s heart breaks in concern for all those who are lost and alone. There are people whom you know in your heart right now have lives that are just paper thin, who need depth and meaning and assurance of love, forgiveness and grace, and they need to hear it from those who have accepted it, from us. You know who they are. They may be rich and empty. They may be poor and empty. They may be young and empty, old and empty. God came to us and created this church, and we are a part of this church. It’s not just for us, but specifically for them. We have one marching order, to go and make disciples. Let’s do our job.

Next week, homework assignment. Bring, invite, think of small group ministries that we can form to offer folks on the outside so we can get them first in the door so then they can see and trust that we mean what we say. That we are children of God offering love, forgiveness and grace. Let us in that way wake the sleeping giant that this church is. Amen.