

“Population: Two”
Rev. Ruth Martz

September 11, 2016
Luke 14:1-10

September 11th, this is just the right time to hear the good news that Jesus proclaims in his parables. In the past few days, I read three different kinds of articles with these headlines: “How the unity we forged broke apart,” “Learning from 9/11 and the long reach of disaster,” and “Children of 9/11 draw inspiration from tragedy.”

Yes, this is just the right time to hear the good news that our God is a searching God, searching for whatever or whoever is lost, and we can be lost in so many ways! Stuck or overwhelmed, afraid or confused, mistreated or ignored.

And why is our God constantly searching for the one that is lost? Because God considers everything and everyone to be worthy of being found, worthy of being loved, forgiven, saved, in order to live the full and glorious life that God desires for us.

Our God is a God of action--like a shepherd who goes searching for the lost sheep, or a woman for a lost coin, not stopping until the lost one is found.. The woman lights a lamp and sweeps, the shepherd lays the sheep on his shoulders, comes home, friends and neighbors are all called—“Rejoice with me!” God’s lavish feast of joy!

Jesus asks: Which one of you does not search and find and rejoice like the shepherd and the woman? Of course, you all do!

Ah, we’ve entered the realm, the kin-dom of God that is made visible in our midst whenever the lost are found, whenever God’s love and abundance and grace are shared with someone in great need of them. Most, if not all, people get lost at least once in their lives, and probably more than once. Don’t worry, you don’t have to admit it out loud! And God keeps searching and finding us again and again. Good news!

We pray that everyone knows the joy of being found, of feeling deeply loved and valued. I think that we live a great deal of our lives somewhere in that space between lost and found, found and lost, between resisting and welcoming God’s grace and guidance.

We aren’t only in need of God, for God also needs us. We know that there are some who are in much greater need than others, whether it be in mind, body or soul or all three, those whom Jesus calls “the least of these.” We are not only in need of God, but God also needs us.

And yes, this too is good news! Joining God and one another as we search and tend to those who are lost in our midst. Only then can we know the joy of finding, of offering kindness and hope to another person. Of course, God’s good news is often disruptive and challenging, pulling us out of our own little world, pushing us to reach out to people we don’t know or might prefer to avoid, when we’re content with where we are, thank you very much!

In the beginning of the song by Matthew West, words we read in our Call to Worship, he says that he'd never gone hungry, had a little money and shoes on his feet. He was comfortable in his own little world, population: ME.

The song continues:

“I try to stay awake during Sunday morning church
I throw a twenty in the plate but I never give 'til it hurts
And I turn off the news when I don't like what I see
It's easy to do when it's population – me.”

Then comes the refrain that we heard earlier.

“What if there's a bigger picture? /What if I'm missing out?
What if there's a greater purpose / I could be living right now
Outside my own little world”

“Well, I stopped at a red light, looked out my window
I saw a cardboard sign, said “Help this homeless widow”
Above that sign was the face of a human
And I thought to myself, “God, what have I been doing?”

So I rolled down the window and I looked her in the eye
I thought, how many times have I just passed her by?
So I gave her some money when I drove on through
And my own little world reached **Population: two.**”

If you get a chance, please go on YouTube to watch the video of this song; it's very well done. The man gives the widow a \$5 and thinks he's just driving through. Not enough to claim Population—two in your life! Suddenly in the next frame, the homeless widow is not only in his car, but she is also in the driver's seat! Whoa! I mean, I know that the shepherd laid the sheep over his shoulders, but come on, let's be realistic!

Jesus knew all about human reality; the context in which Jesus tells his parable is all too real, and unfortunately, not so different from the division and conflict in our nation and world today. Tax collectors and sinners on one side, Pharisees and scribes on the other—and Jesus seeking to bring them together, to bridge the gap with an astounding vision of what can be, what is possible, what the realm of God is truly all about.

None of these people are all good or all bad. The striking difference between these two groups lies in their response to Jesus and the kingdom. The sinners come near to listen to him, they're the ones who know they are lost and in need of repentance and God's grace, To repent is to turn around and turn toward God and God's ways. In contrast, the well-respected religious leaders keep grumbling and criticizing Jesus, staying at a distance from any awareness that they too may be lost, as they cling to their own little world of righteousness.

We're not so different in our society, which also names its "losers," those who are seen as a burden to society, as hopelessly lost. But we don't have to embrace that perspective, because we listen for the still-speaking God to teach and show us the way. We understand that it begins with one person reaching out to another, **moving from Population –one to Population--two.**

As Jesus said: *For where two or more are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*

Of course, Jesus' parable doesn't end only with Population: two! Far from it, for the shepherd and the woman call all their friends and neighbors to rejoice with them. The community comes together for a great feast or banquet in celebration of the lost one who has been found.

And you know what happens in Matthew West's video? The widow driving his car points out someone on the sidewalk who looks like he or she needs help--first a mother concerned about her little girl, then a businessman who's just been laid off, then a young woman who's crying. The car stops, and each person, one at a time, appears in the backseat. Each is individually seen, heard, sheltered. **Two becomes three—and more.**

Joy in heaven! Joy in the presence of the angels of God when one who is lost is found. Do you see it and hear it?

Sept. 11—yes, this is just the right time to hear the good news that Jesus proclaims, that there is a searching God whose Spirit is always working within us and between us toward restoration and wholeness of community.

Let us respond to this good news by saying,

Yes, Jesus, we are all about connections that come from the heart!

We are and we will be attentive to who is missing, who may be lost, in need of help or kindness or a listening ear, within and beyond these walls.

We are your people and Christ's disciples, lost and searching, found and finding.

And yes, we even understand that if we are feeling pretty content and comfortable with what we're doing, then it's time to stretch ourselves, as individuals and as a church,

beyond our own little world.

Thanks be to God for the good news proclaimed through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Resources

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This sermon is the first in a Worship Series entitled "Outside My Own Little World," the title from a song by Matthew West. The title and resources for this sermon are based on a Worship Series by Dr. Marcia McFee.

www.workingpreacher.com. Commentaries on Luke 14: 1-10.