

ARE YOU MISSING SOMETHING?

(10/15/2023)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 15:1-10

“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.” (Luke 15:4-5)

I forgot to mention something during the announcements, but I think it needs to be said. As you know, the COVID numbers are rising. They are considerably lower than they were during the peak, but COVID, in its many variants, is still out there. One of the members of our Tuesday afternoon study group recently contracted it on her way home from Italy. A friend of ours recently contracted it for the third time—and this time was the worst of the three. So, we still need to be careful. We need to keep our vaccine boosters up to date. And we need to test when we have credible reason to do so.

The decision whether or not to attend a certain gathering and/or to wear a mask in certain places are individual decisions. Even though we may be suffering from the decision fatigue that has become endemic to the ongoing pandemic, as I believe we all have, and which I *know* that I have, we still need to make decisions based on our estimate of the risk. For example, Darlene and I, after thinking about it, decided to attend the decommissioning worship service at the First Congregational Church in Gardner two weeks ago. Once we saw how big the sanctuary was and how there was plenty of social distancing among those who attended, we decided not to wear masks for the service. We decided to skip the reception after the service. But these were our own decisions.

The guidelines for wearing masks established by the Diaconate at our last meeting was that we leave the decision up to you. We just ask you to remember that there are people among us who are immunocompromised or vulnerable, perhaps because of age (you may be one of them). Please respect the decisions that others make.

The wearing of masks is apparently once again becoming a problem in our schools. Children are being teased, verbally assaulted, harassed, and bullied for wearing masks. They are being called bad and hurtful names, names like “Democrat,” “lib,” or “woke.” They are being called BIS, an acronym for believer in science, and SRP, which stands for socially responsible person.

As we know, words can hurt. I hope that in this church, which prides itself in being open, affirming, and welcoming to all, we would not call fellow parishioners hurtful names like “Democrat,” “lib,” “believer in science,” “socially responsible person,” or “woke” just because

they have chosen to wear a mask. I'm not saying that any of you are doing this; I just want to remind you that we refrain from calling people hurtful names in this church. Enough said.

The first few months of fall, with Rally Day and Re-Covenanting Sunday, is a time of new beginnings in the life of our little church. As I mentioned two weeks ago, our church's "new year" coincides with the Jewish celebration of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. It is fitting that, as we enter into a new church year, we should look back on the year we have just lived and weigh it on the scales that are one of the symbols associated with Yom Kippur. We need to affirm what was good in the past year, and we need to correct that which stands in need of correction. In light of our scripture lesson this morning, we especially need to become aware of that which is missing in our life—both outwardly and inwardly.

It is no secret that we need to do a better job of marketing our church. Those of us who are involved in the life of this church know that we have something special here, something special to offer to the community. We need to do a better job of communicating the essence of who we are, that which makes us unique as a church, because it is something that is missing in many people's lives, something that many people need.

BTW, I confess that marketing is not my strong suit. I am an introvert. I operate out of the belief that was articulated in the movie, *Field of Dreams*: "If we build it, they will come." When I share my philosophy with people like my son, Jay, who has a brilliant business mind, they politely (or not so politely) snicker. And I am coming to see their point! People won't come to us, won't check us out if they don't know we are here. In response to this late-in-life revelation, I am working with a consultant to help me set up an email for the church, our own Facebook listing, and our own Venmo account to make it easier for people to learn about and hopefully support our church and its mission. So, perhaps an old dog can learn new tricks!

When we think of what makes our church special, the first thing that comes to mind is community. We have a special community here, a community of faith! In our church, every single member knows every single member. We not only know each other's names; we know each other, and we care deeply for each other. This is an important part of who we are as a church!

When we think of what makes our church special, we should mention our belief in the power of prayer. We hold each other in our prayers because we believe that prayer makes a difference both for the person who prays and the person who is the recipient of the prayer. This belief, which is grounded in our faith, is an important part of our identity as a church and an important dimension of true Christian community.

Third, we are committed to grow in the faith. We seek to learn more about our own religious tradition and other religious traditions, other spiritual paths, because of our desire to deepen our relationship with God. We do not pretend to have all the answers. However, we believe that if we ask the right questions, and if we explore these questions with what Zen Buddhists call “beginner’s mind,” with the guidance of the Holy Spirit we will live our way into the answers.

In our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Study & Growth Group this past week, we discussed the meaning of the word “religion.” As I understand it, religion, from the Latin *re-ligio*, means to reconnect. Something, perhaps an original wholeness, an original unity of us and God, has become broken. We have become separated or alienated from our true Centre. Our religious faith provides those of us who have become conscious of this separation with teachings, with spiritual disciplines or paths that lead us back to the One. At least it leads those of us back who are seekers.

In our meeting this past Tuesday, we considered a passage written by the explorer Peter Matthiessen. Peter Matthiessen wrote *In Search of the Snow Leopard* about his mystical journey through Tibet. Like Matthiessen, I also looked for the mystical snow leopard (and, like him, unsuccessfully) on my two trekking pilgrimages through Nepal and Tibet. Matthiessen has written the following:

Soon the child’s clear eye is clouded over by ideas and opinions, preconceptions and abstractions. Simple free being becomes encrusted with the burdensome armor of the ego. Not until years later does an instinct come that a vital sense of mystery has been withdrawn. The sun glints through the pines, and the heart is pierced in a moment of beauty and strange pain, like a memory of paradise. After that day . . . we become seekers.

I think of my grandson, Miles, and my granddaughter, Emerson, every time I read this—and I tear up. I think of not only what they will gain, but also what they will lose as they grow up, as they become educated and socialized. And I hope that later in life, when they realize that they have become separated from a vital sense of Mystery, they will become seekers.

We are a community of seekers. We seek that which is missing in our life as individuals in the conviction, in the strong conviction that what we seek is also missing in the world. We seek the metaphorical “treasure hidden in the field,” “the pearl of great price,” “the lost coin,” the kingdom of God within. If we fail to find this treasure and integrate it into our life, we will suffer. If our nation fails to find this treasure; if the world fails to find this treasure, many, many people will suffer unnecessarily. In fact, they already are!

I am considering pursuing this theme in our church sign postings over the next few weeks. Our sign this week reads, “R U Missing Something?” Similar to the old Burman Shave signs, which most of you here this morning or who are reading this online are too young to remember, I might follow it with “What Do You Think It Is?” Then, “Do You Think It Might Be God?” Then, “Do You Think That God Is Missing You?” And finally, the clincher: “Especially on Sunday Mornings?” I have to admit I think this Burma Shave series of sign postings would be very creative! I can’t wait to see how many new members we pick up because of them!

Even if these postings on our church sign don’t give rise to a flood of new members, the questions are still worth exploring. This morning’s scripture lesson speaks to the theme of something missing.

In the context of his teachings about the Kingdom of God, Jesus tells us about a lost sheep and a lost coin. He invites us to consider how these parables might apply to God and also how they might apply to us.

A shepherd goes to great lengths to recover one lost sheep. Though it is commonly assumed that the shepherd is God, and the lost sheep is a sinner who has gone astray, I would encourage us to think of us as the shepherd and the little lamb as something we have lost.

I confess that I don’t read these parables as examples of the theme of sin and repentance, about God seeking and saving the lost sinner. Sin implies a conscious choice. Sheep don’t decide to become lost. Coins don’t decide to be misplaced. Neither sheep nor coins can repent. I suspect that the last verse in this morning’s lesson on the lost sheep and again, at the end of the section on the lost coin, were a later addendum, for they doesn’t really fit what I think Jesus was trying to say: “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” This may very well be true, but I do not think this is what Jesus was trying to tell us.

If the parable contains a teaching about God, it assures us that God seeks, searches, finds, and saves. The shepherd loves his sheep! He places the little lamb upon his shoulders and carries it back to safety. The picture of Jesus that appears in so many children’s Bibles, and the painting that hangs on the left front wall of our sanctuary with a lamb on his shoulders or nestled in his bosom is a comforting picture. However, I suspect that the parables are telling us something more than this. They may be telling us something about our own spiritual journey.

Last weekend, Darlene and I drove through an area of southern New Hampshire between Concord and Portsmouth that is known as Antique Alley. In one of the approximately fifteen

antique stores we explored, I came across this painting, which I immediately purchased for our sanctuary. For those of you who are reading this online, it is a picture of Jesus, surrounded by sheep, walking over rough terrain, and carrying a little lamb in his arms. The little lamb is looking lovingly up at Jesus. When I look at this painting, I don't see sin and forgiveness; what I see is love, a love that will not let us go—even if we get lost, even if we depart from the true path.

Do you have the feeling that something is missing in your life? What do you think it is? Do you think it might be God? If you find yourself feeling separated or alienated from God, then God is missing you. God misses you when you are not at worship on Sunday mornings. God misses you when you forget to pray. If God is like the shepherd who searched for his lost lamb or the woman who searched for her lost coin, God is missing us.

Jesus challenges us to examine our life to see if something is missing. If something is missing, do we know what it is? Do we know where to look? Are we committed to searching for that which is lost, to restoring it to its rightful place in the center of our lives?

What it is that we need? What draws us to church, to worship? What leads us into communion, into fellowship with this church? We may stand in need of physical or emotional healing. We may need to experience forgiveness. We may need courage to face a difficult decision. We may need strength to carry the burdens that life has placed upon our shoulders. We may need to experience the peace that passes all understanding. We may need to discover or rediscover our meaning in life. No matter what it is, our spiritual journey begins with the awareness of our need.

The shepherd has so much! He has ninety-nine sheep. Why would the shepherd leave the ninety-nine to search for one that is lost? Is it because the missing element is crucial to the experience of inner wholeness, to the experience of the kingdom of God? Symbolically, one hundred is a complete number; ninety-nine is not. Like the shepherd, we have so much, especially in the realm of material possessions. It is the part that is missing that is important! The part that is missing is the alchemists' true gold, the treasure hidden in the field, the pearl of great price. If we fail to find this, even if we are physically alive, we may experience spiritual death.

How do we know when something important is missing in our life? What are the symptoms? Michael Yaconelli, who, in his book, *Dangerous Wonder: The Adventure of Childlike Faith*, calls us to recapture the joy of being a child and apply it to our relationship with God, has said,

The death of the soul is never quick. It is a slow dying, a succession of little deaths that continues until we wake up one day on the edge of God's voice, on the fringe of God's belovedness, beyond the adventure of God's claim on our lives.

When this happens to us: when we begin to experience a creeping death within us; when we find ourself on the edge of God's still, small voice; when we feel that we are living on the fringe of God's belovedness; when we realize we have lost a sense of the great adventure of living; we need to remember that God is seeking us. We need to remember how Jesus, the Good Shepherd, reached out to those who were lost. We also need to remember that when we experience, when we become conscious of the many little deaths that can add up to become the death of the soul, like the shepherd and the woman with the coin, we need to begin the search.

Sometimes an awareness of the sense of mystery that we have lost will come to us as we watch a beautiful sunrise or sunset, a little flower, the face of a little child. As Peter Matthiessen suggests, it can come unexpectedly when we are struck by the sun glinting through the pine trees following a morning rain, piercing our heart with a deep sense of beauty and a strange pain, a reminder of a lost paradise. At other times this awareness will come to us as a still, small voice that whispers in our ear. These beautiful little experiences, which we sometimes experience in worship, invite us, call us to become seekers!

As we meet here this morning in worship at the beginning of another church year, for those of us who have discovered that we are seekers, we know that this is a wonderful place to begin!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our website later this week.

RESPONSE TO THE WORD—A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP

A few minutes ago, I spoke of what I call “decision fatigue,” the fatigue that comes from having to make many conscious, well-thought-out, important decisions about things that, before the pandemic, would have required no thought at all.

This week I became aware of an excellent example of decision fatigue and how we might respond constructively to how this pulls us out of life.

As you know, our church is a member of the United Parishes of Southborough. As members, we support the Southborough Food Pantry, an outreach ministry of the United

Parishes. The Food Pantry is always in need of all kinds of food, cleaning supplies, diapers, pet food, toilet paper, etc. In our narthex, as we enter or leave the sanctuary, we pass a cardboard box nicely decorated by Darlene. It says, "Food Pantry." And it is almost always empty.

Two weeks ago, Jim Holmes, Dianne Simmons, and the Stewardship & Growth Committee decided to try something different. Instead of asking parishioners to think of things that they might donate to the Food Pantry, we told you what we needed! We asked you for only one thing—packages of cookies. The following week, the Food Pantry box was filled to overflowing with packages of cookies! Last week, we asked for coffee—coffee of any kind. And again, the box was filled to overflowing!

This is a reminder that we should not draw the conclusion from an empty Food Pantry box that we are a cold and unfeeling people, that we don't care about our fellow townspeople who are suffering from food insecurity. It may be that we just can't decide what the Food Pantry needs, what it needs right now, and what we should buy. When we tell you to just bring one item, the box is filled to overflowing! So, from now on, this is what we are going to do! This week, by the way, we are asking for macaroni and cheese.

I would also point out that this is what we do with our monthly mission offering. Instead of spending hours surfing the internet to find causes worthy of support, if you pledge to our church, included in your pledge envelopes each month is an envelope for the designated mission of the month. This month, October, we are supporting The American Himalayan project "Stop Girl Trafficking." Our gifts enable people from the American Himalayan Foundation to go into little villages throughout rural Nepal to inform parents that when people try to convince them to let them take their daughter, to place their daughter under their "care," with the promise that their daughter will receive a good education and a better life, they are really selling these girls into the international sex trade, where they will live a short and absolutely terrible life. Our money also goes to build schools for these little girls in Nepal.

What we share with our neighbors through our monthly mission and our local food pantry is a form of stewardship, a sharing of what we have with those who have much less. And, you have to admit, it feels good to do so!

It is in this spirit that we dedicate our gifts to this church, to its mission outreach, and the many gifts we share with each other, with our families, and with the world.