

“Are We Open to Being Found?”

Are we open to being found? Friends – in person and at a physical distance, the Spirit of God (that is, fathomless Love) has gathered us together on this fourteenth of twenty-four Sundays in the long, green, growing season of Ordinary Time in the circle of our church year. This is our Connection Sunday, a marker of our shift as a congregation from the sun-soaked days of summer toward the crisper days of autumn.

This is also a solemn day of remembrance in our nation – a day that annually reminds us of the terrible potential for violence when we let our differences drive a wedge of fear between us. Fear yanks us off the course of Love, toward the othering mentality of us versus them that fosters false identities as enemies. Fear leads us to marginalize, vilify, and eventually dehumanize the other. Jesus also witnessed the sorts of ugly divisive attitudes and behaviors in his community two millennia ago that we witness and experience today. Jesus sensed how lost we could become yet believed that we could each be found.

As we enter now into an extended moment of reflection, let’s each wonder: am I open to being found? Will I find another when they’re lost? Let us pray: Empower us, Spirit of God, with serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, with courage to change the things we can, and with the wisdom to discern the one from the other. Amen.

“*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I myself am the worst.*” These words in today’s reading from the letter to First Timothy are ascribed to the Apostle Paul. Scholars understand Paul to have done much of his writing around the year 60 C.E. or so, which was approximately twenty-five or thirty years after the execution of Jesus. What did Paul mean to convey by claiming that he was the worst of sinners? And what did he mean by ‘sinner?’

In the original Greek language of the Newer Testament in our Christian Bible, the word for sin is *hamartia*, which means ‘to miss the mark.’

The historical context for the word *hamartia* (that is, sin) is a leisure activity akin to throwing darts. The experience of salvation is core to our Christian faith. God's (Love's) initial aim is diminished in its efficacy if we continually ignore or block it. To ignore or block God's initial aim is sin (*hamartia*, missing the mark). When recognition of sin leads us to repentance, the way is opened for *metanoia*, transformative repentance. In a state of *metanoia*, we see things in such new ways that we cannot possibly revert back to past ways of perception. Transformative repentance opens us further to God's initial aim of love; and that aim invites us toward the best possibilities. For me, this way of framing sin as *hamartia* (missing the mark) and salvation as *metanoia* came to light through the work of twentieth and early twenty-first century process theologian, John Cobb. In his book, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, Cobb wrote about the experience of *metanoia* in these words, "*Since God forgives us, accepts us, and gives to us what we can receive, it is appropriate for us to turn from concern with justifying what we have been, to be grateful and assured, and to open ourselves to the Logos as it comes to us.*" Those are words from John Cobb.

When Paul refers to the reality of sinners in need of saving, I believe he was referring to the universal experience of missing the mark of loving God, self and other. Let's hear again Paul's very personal reflection on his experience of salvation: "*Here's a saying that can be trusted and is worthy of your complete acceptance: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.' Of these I myself am the worst. But I was dealt with mercifully for this reason: so that in me—the worst case of all—Jesus Christ might demonstrate perfect patience; and so that I might become an example to those who would later have faith in Christ and gain everlasting life.*" Across the millennia, friends, Christians have wondered about Paul's bold declaration that he was the worst. These particular phrases from this letter to Timothy have been hand-picked for weaponization against marginalized people. Scholars and lay people have wondered about the specific nature of Paul's sin and sometimes concluded that he must have struggled with his sexual orientation or an addiction of some kind.

People have often attempted to use Paul's non-specific language to support their fear-based ideas about what does and does not count as sin – as losing our way from the mark of Love. But Paul was clearly more energized by the experience of *metanoia* than he was by any one particular way he missed the mark across his youth and middle age. For Paul, sin was about having lost his way, having strayed from the heart of love in ways that had sometimes led him to feel like he was the absolute worst. Haven't we all found ourselves feeling that way at one time or another when we've deeply hurt ourself or another?

“Meanwhile,” we heard in the gospel of Luke, “the tax collectors and the ‘sinners’ were all gathering around Jesus to listen to his teaching, at which the Pharisees and the religious scholars murmured, ‘This person welcomes sinners and eats with them!’”

Imagine how the people gathered around Jesus that day, not unlike us today, came from all walks of lives, varied in their socioeconomic locations and particular livelihoods. As we hear again Jesus' parables, I invite you to wonder: how might these two stories and their characters have resonated or not with Jesus' original audience? And how do they resonate or not with you? We heard:

“Jesus then addressed this parable to them: ‘Who among you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, doesn't leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and search for the lost one until it's found? And finding it, you put the sheep on your shoulders in jubilation. Once home, you invite friends and neighbors in and say to them, “Rejoice with me! I've found my lost sheep!”

What householder, who had ten silver pieces and loses one, doesn't light a lamp and sweep the house in a diligent search until she finds what she had lost? And when it is found, the householder calls in her friends and neighbors and says, “Rejoice with me! I've found the silver piece I lost!””

And Jesus offers this reflective comment on his own stories:

“I tell you, in the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent.”

A moment ago, I invited you to wonder if Jesus’ stories about a sheep herder and about a householder resonated with his original audience as well as if they resonate with you. Many in the crowd had never shepherded sheep. It wasn’t how they spent their days. Many in the crowd did not bear the responsibilities of managing a home, concerned about every bit of currency used and how it would be fruitful. Some of us have those experiences – of managing a whole flock of persons, or creatures, or projects. Some of us have the experience of managing or co-managing a home. The key is to be open to those who do have experiences, however similar or different from our own, because we can grow by embracing both our commonalities and our differences.

Being found and known and finding and really knowing another requires courageous vulnerability and gracious curiosity. Being found and finding another requires really a perpetual state of wonder and openness.

Brené Brown, North American professor and author, has written this (which came up in my Facebook feed this past week). She writes:

“My mom taught us to never look away from people’s pain. The lesson was simple: Don’t look away. Don’t pretend not to see hurt. Look people in the eye. Even when their pain is overwhelming. And when you’re in pain, find the people who can look you in the eye. We need to know we’re not alone – especially when we’re hurting. This lesson is one of the greatest gifts of my life.” Words from the wise Brené Brown.

In this congregation of People’s Church, I have found people who will look me in the eye, and one of my great hopes for each of us is that you will also look around (perhaps do it right now) look around and see that there are loving people who will dare to look one another in the eye in times of joy and in times of challenge.

I was also reminded this week of how much I adore the work of Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, two musicians who have created music for several hymns in recent years – *The Greatest Showman*, *La La Land*, and here are lyrics to a song called “You Will Be Found,” by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul for the movie musical *Dear Evan Hanson*. I invite you into a posture of holding your hands open and holding your spirits open to how these words relate to your own life or perhaps to someone you love.

*“Have you ever felt like nobody was there?
Have you ever felt forgotten in the middle of nowhere?
Have you ever felt like you could disappear?
Like you could fall, and no one would hear?
Well, let that lonely feeling wash away
Maybe there's a reason to believe you'll be okay
'Cause when you don't feel strong enough to stand
You can reach, reach out your hand”*

Friends, Jesus so often and so beautifully reached, reached out his hand. And now that is our work to do. And God will embolden us in that work. So let us depart from this moment of reflection with a hopeful blessing for our ancestor in faith, the Apostle Paul. Again, in a posture of receiving, hear these words:

“I thank Christ Jesus of Savior, who has strengthened me, given me this work, and judged me faithful... and the grace of our God has been granted to me in overflowing measure, as was the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.”

Friends, there is much work to be done. So let us be open to being found by one another and let us be open to finding one another. Love is counting on us.
Amen!

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People’s Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
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Luke 15: 1-10, 1 Timothy 1: 12-17