

Immanuel United Church
September 11, 2022

Welcome

Call to Worship:

We gather, searching for that which is lost

Ourselves, our community, our world.

We gather, reminding ourselves of one who searches for us, who calls us into community with one another and with the world.

We gather in this building, in our homes, in our communities, in our hearts.

We gather with the assurance that what is lost will be found.

We gather, knowing that all are welcomed.

Hymn: VU 389 *God is Here*

Prayer:

**Sacred Shepherd, who looks for the lost,
Holy Woman, who searches in every nook and cranny,
in this time of worship,
remind us that we are precious.**

**Sometimes we lose our way,
wandering off the path you lay before us.
Sometimes we end up in places that confuse us,
that scare us, that make us feel unsafe.**

**Sometimes we lead others into troubling places,
thinking we are helping.**

**Hear us now as we bring to you, those times and events in our lives when we have
found ourselves to be troubled,
when we have lost sight of who we are and who you call us to be.**

silent prayer

**Help us to trust that we will be found,
that we will be safe,
that we are loved.
Amen.**

Hymn: MV20 ***God of Still Waiting***

Scripture: Psalm 119: 169-176
Luke 15: 1-10

Choir Anthem: ***What Does the Lord Require of You***

Sermon:

I have a question for you this morning: Has anybody lost anything lately, anything at all - your keys, the book you were reading two days ago, that piece a paper that had an important note written on it reminding you to do something, but you can't remember what, that piece of clothing that you were going to make a decision about whether or not to keep or put it in the giveaway pile - and, where is the giveaway pile anyway?

Our main scripture reading this week is very familiar to most of us - the stories of the lost sheep and lost coin. As I read these stories for what seemed to me to be the millionth time in my life, I found myself thinking about what it means to be lost or to lose something. Perhaps it is because as I am getting older, I am losing things much more frequently. Perhaps it is because as I age, what I seem to be losing much more frequently are my friends and my family members - siblings, cousins - as they approach and reach the end of life.

And so, I started to look a little deeper into some possible alternative understandings of these stories in our lives.

I began by thinking about what I do when I lose something. My usual pattern is to start looking in a panic - anywhere - under the furniture, under the piles of paper, in drawers, closets. And then my partner gets into it: "Did you check your pockets? Do you want me to look? When did you have it last?" All the time I am getting more exasperated - and frustrated with myself.

Perhaps because I am older now, eventually I will calm down and take a more thoughtful approach. When *did* I have it last? What was I doing with it? how important is it that I find it? What will happen if I don't find it? Will life continue?

Sometimes the wisdom of maturity can be very helpful in answering these questions. I came across a wonderful article written by Kathryn Schultz in New Yorker magazine recently. In this article Schultz asks a question about what is more significant, the loss of a wedding ring or the loss or the marriage relationship? And that question does begin to put the concept of loss into perspective. Some kinds of loss are more important than others.

In her article, Schultz points out that in English, at least, the verb "to lose" is rooted in the concept of sorrow and it has to do with the idea of perishing. Only later does it gain the idea of misplacement of an object

Now I am not a biblical scholar, so I am not at all sure about what the roots of the word “loss” are in the biblical languages, but this early English concept of loss having to do with relationship and the ability to sustain life certainly has me rethinking the biblical stories.

Something else that has hit me this week while thinking about these biblical stories is the situation that we in the church find ourselves these days. Having come through two and a half difficult years of pandemic life, many of us have returned to church congregations that we don't really recognize any more. I can't say how many times I have heard people in various congregations talk about how church life is so different now. There are so many people missing on a Sunday morning - people who have aged and can no longer get to church, people who have moved into care homes and supportive living, people who have died. Some people have decided they would rather “attend” church via YouTube or some other online media - sometimes because physically it is easier, given their aging bodies, sometimes because it means they won't constantly be asked to volunteer for the endless number of tasks that need doing, sometimes because it is much more convenient, sometimes because they no longer have a way to get to church. Here at Immanuel, you have also lost your minister - someone whose role, in part, was to help you work through your losses.

The reality is that church just isn't what it used to be in so many ways. When we first started returning to worship services back in the late winter or spring, we were invited not to sing, not to have fellowship time over coffee, not to gather together, but to sit separately. And of course, there are the masks that don't even allow us to smile at the person sitting in the next row. Well, you can smile, but who is going to know? In short, so many of those things that enable us to be in relationship with one another were taken taken from us and in many congregations that is still the reality. And relationship is so important.

I recently read an essay by a woman whose name is Janet Files. She writes about having a house fire in which she and her husband lost many of their belongings. As she describes her experience she marvelled at how easily she was able to let go of those possessions that were destroyed in the fire, even those that held great meaning for her. And then, she talked about how she was prepared for this event by her experience of helping a close friend go through her dying, creating little rituals of farewell to friends and family, letting go of all that was special and sacred in her life. The letting go of life was a much deeper emotional experience than the letting go of objects - even special, meaningful objects.

I was reminded of my own experience with my mother when she was dying. In the final week of her life my mother was admitted into the emergency ward at St. B and she stayed in emerge for two nights before being moved into palliative care. What do you do in a busy emergency ward with someone who is dying? Well, the only thing I could think of was to sing. So I started singing lullabies and then my mom responded with one of the lullabies she used to sing to me when I was a child. Now my mom could never hold a tune but I have to say that hearing her sing that old lullaby certainly brought me to tears and I knew deep within me that those very feeble, out of tune notes symbolized everything that was special and sacred about our relationship.

Over the years since my mom's death, I have given away or lost almost all of my mementos of her life. I do have some pictures and a couple of objects, but really what I hang onto more than anything is the memories - memories of time shared, memories of relationship.

Now, you might be wondering what all this has to do with the stories of the lost sheep and lost coin. It does seem that my mind has wandered off in a completely different direction than these stories might suggest. After all, they are stories about the loss of things - a coin, a lamb.

But is that really what they are about?

What does the shepherd do when he finds the sheep? He calls his friends together for a celebration? What does the woman do when she finds her coin? She calls her friends together for a celebration. The finding of the things can only have meaning if the experience is shared with others. It is the relationship with others that gives all the things we have, their real value.

I think that is a big part of what is really going on here. The real meaning of our lives only becomes clear when that life is shared with others - in relationship with another or with community. And I also think that it is both the joys *and* the sorrows, the losses *and* the findings that need to be shared. The celebrations need to be shared, along with the mourning and grieving times of life. It is the relationships we have that enable us to continue on in life, even if the lost objects are never found. And that is what church is supposed to be - a community of people, people relating with one another.

Think about why Jesus told these stories in the first place. He told them in response to those people who criticized him for hanging around with "tax-collectors and sinners". He told the stories because of those who criticized the relationships he held as important, because he valued relationship - relationship with all, not just with those who the powerful think are important.

I also think in some way, that those who had criticized Jesus did so from a deep place of longing - a longing that they may not even have recognized within themselves. They may have been critical of Jesus, but they did seek him out. They had come looking for him. I believe that they too, were looking for relationship, for community. And they just had not yet realized how close they were to finding that community, how close they were to finding that which they had lost - not objects, not wealth, but community, relationship.

So I am thinking that now, in this time and place we are like those who came to find Jesus and to challenge him because they were not happy with the way things were. We find ourselves in a world we don't always understand anymore and we don't always know how to relate to one another in this unfamiliar world and sometimes we are critical of one another. We don't know how to find our community, our relationships. We feel lost. Two plus years of living life differently has left us feeling lost and confused.

I would invite us during these confusing times, to pause and remind ourselves of the importance of healing and building our relationships and to do this in ways that are careful, respectful and loving. I would invite us to recognize those people who are absent from our times of worship because they are not *able* to be here for whatever reason. How do we let them know and feel they are still a valued part of this community? How do we celebrate life with others in these days? How do we honour the fear that exists in some people's lives and help them to know support in the midst of whatever it is they are experiencing?

It is my belief that we need to recognize and let go of some of the things we have lost in the last two years, but then open our hearts to one another, to reach out perhaps in new ways, to find new ways of caring for one another, new ways of being community. I would invite us to open our hearts to relationship and community once again - in old ways and in new ways.

Hymn: MV79 ***Spirit, Open My Heart***

Offering

Offering Prayer

Prayer of the Community

Prayer of Jesus

Hymn: MV150 ***Spirit God, Be Our Breath***

Commissioning and Benediction:

Go into the world loved, forgiven, and found.
May you see the Love of God all around you.
May you show the compassion of Christ in all that you do.
And may you be surrounded by the Holy Spirit
As you seek her guidance today, tomorrow and forever more.

Amen