

Gathering 2022 Sermon

Sunday, July 31, 2022

Text: Luke 15 & 1 John 1:1-4

Message: Losing and Finding

I finished putting food on my plate. I turned and looked across the crowded patio, looking to find an available chair. I noticed one on the far side, so I made my way over. I smiled at the gentleman sitting in the other chair and I said, “May I join you?”

“Yes, of course”, he said. I had seen him across the room in our meeting just before, but had not met him yet, so I introduced myself.

He replied by saying, “My name is Bahati, but everyone calls me Safari.” “Safari! Right on. What a great name.”, I said. “You lead the new conference in Malawi that we just accepted into Mennonite World Conference.” “Yes, yes, we are very excited” he said.

“But you must also speak French, because I saw you sitting with the Congolese leaders.” He replied, “I am from Congo. I fled to Malawi years ago because of the violence.” “I am sorry to hear that. Where do you live in Malawi?” “In a refugee camp.” “But wait, I thought you were planting churches and establishing a conference.” “Yes!” “In a refugee camp?!?” “Yes!”

Safari went on to talk about visiting people, sharing of his life with Jesus, planting churches, working with people who were once enemies, practicing reconciliation and forgiveness and all the challenges that go with that in a refugee camp of 50,000 people. I was in awe.

“Tell me about Mennonite Church Canada”, he said. “Well,”, I said, we have some Mennonites in

Canada who came here as refugees recently. They have established themselves and formed churches in our conference.

Many Mennonites in Canada, though, are the children or grandchildren or greatgrandchildren of refugees. They weren’t put in refugee camps but were given land that supposedly belonged to no one.

Farms, church communities and schools were established and all of them thrived for many years. But things are changing now.

Many people in our congregations have become quite prosperous. We don’t need each other anymore, and we are very assimilated to the culture around us. We struggle to be community together because we have many commitments beyond church.

Meanwhile the Canadian culture has been diversifying, secularism is growing, COVID-19 has permanently changed things, and we are now coming to terms with the fact that the land that we are on actually did belong to others – to the Indigenous people of Canada, and it is hard to know where to start to begin to fix this.

By this time, Safari’s face had fallen. I said, “I am sorry, I don’t want to sound discouraging, but this is where we are at.”

Over the course of our General Council meetings and Mennonite World Conference in Indonesia, I couldn’t help but think about how some of the 109 conferences that belong to MWC are really thriving, some a growing beyond their capacity to really manage it.

Others are not in a growth phase. Some have sincerely tried to reach out and grow but haven’t.

I have believed for a long time that the way of faith, the spiritual path is not a straight line, it is not a ladder you climb a rung at a time until you reach sainthood.

I think the spiritual path is a journey of losing and finding.

Luke 15, as we heard read for us, contains three stories of loss. The lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. One from the animal world, one from the material world, and one from the human world. Jesus' use of these three stories shows the universality of the losing and finding pattern, not just in one's own spiritual journey, but in our human relationships.

In each of the three parables, you think you have it, you lose it, you rediscover it, and then in each of the three parables there is a celebration. The party is really only thrown after the rediscovery, because you really don't have it until you have lost it and found it.

And I have been thinking, this experience of losing and finding...and true of each person on their spiritual journey, can it be true of congregations or even conferences?

Could it be that while there are churches in our global fellowship that are thriving, that are celebrating, and some New Canadian churches that are also in a time of "finding", could it be that we are not headed for demise, rather we are just in that ebb of losing right now?

Could it be that for the primarily Eurocentric congregations among us that God is emptying our hands of the tools that no longer seem to be working because the old tools that we used for hundreds of years won't be needed for where we are going?

The church of Jesus Christ in the west is not headed for demise. I have believed this from the bottom of my heart long before the pandemic hit. In fact, several years ago, I went to see an osteopath for some upper back/shoulder pain that I was having.

She happened to be a retired competitive downhill skier who was on France's Olympic team several years before. When we were filling out the paperwork in the treatment room she said to me, "What is your occupation?" I said, "I am a pastor at a church."

She said, "You are a pastor?" "Yes", I said. "Do you think that has something to do with this?" "What do you mean?" "Why would you devote your life to a dying institution?" "Did I get the wrong door? Is this career counselling or something?" She didn't think that was funny.

She said, "I come from France. The church is almost gone. Maybe your body is trying to tell you something."

For the rest of the hour as she was working on me, I was stewing. At the end of my appointment, I managed to convince her that it wasn't quite that simple.

But I have thought often, what will it take to get us to the place of finding again? Can we manufacture celebration...to try to jump start it...lots of adrenaline...see if we can refashion what is threadbare? Do we sit in despair, in our lostness like Job, and wonder how much longer we have left?

Or do we remind ourselves that when someone or something is lost, God lights a lamp. God lights a lamp and starts moving toward us, toward the deepest parts of who we are. God lights a lamp and, in love, moves into

the deepest places in our hearts, deeper than where our egos or ambitions reside.

God lights a lamp, and once let in, God searches around through all the clutter of past hurts, misguided ambitions, regrets and lost hopes to help us reconcile things and clear enough space so that it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us, in living relationship.

Sometimes we think that the early church had such an advantage. They knew Jesus in the flesh and blood.

He was a carpenter's son. He worked in a shop and on job sites. When he was old enough, he sat with his friends in the synagogue. He was a young leader in the youth groups.

He was someone that always greeted an older person with a smile when he saw them on the streets of Nazareth and Capernaum. He seemed to warm the room when he was a dinner guest in Bethany.

As he grew in wisdom and understanding, he would share insights that he had gained in prayer while they walked through the countryside. One day he walked through Samaria instead of around it. Another day he plucked grain on the Sabbath because the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath, he said.

And while others rebuked or shied away from the marginalized and those outcast, he had the time, he took the time. It seemed like every night he was in someone's home. He had that way of warming up a room when he entered. Everyone mattered. The women, the children, even the servants.

And sometimes when things in the homes would get a little tense, like Martha saying, "I have so many

things to do, tell Mary to help me." He would smile and say, "Martha, there is only thing that really matters, just one thing."

And one time when the house was packed with people, someone lowered their friend through the roof in the hopes of getting him in front of Jesus. As Jurgen Moltman would later say, "Jesus' healings are not supernatural miracles in a natural world. They are the only truly "natural" things in a world that is unnatural, demonized and wounded."

And that was exactly the thing about Jesus. He taught, he healed, he preached, he showed how so much of the ancient poetry and psalms were pointing to him, all in the context of eating and drinking with people and sleeping on the ground beside them.

And after a few years of this constant companionship, it came to a point where one day Jesus looked into the eyes of Simon Peter, the rough, gruff, and possibly chain-smoking fisherman that he had called years before...he looked into the eyes of Simon Peter and said, "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter replied, "You are the Christ." You are the Word of God enfleshed. You are the God of person-to-person encounter, to see you is to see the face of God".

It was these kinds of encounters that would have followers' years after write, "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon, "ethea-sametha" in the Greek - literally "what we have gazed upon".

This is more than seeing, or looking at, but gazing upon. When you gaze upon another person and in so doing lock eyes with them, your brain realizes that

you're dealing with the mind of the other person who is gazing back at you.

The first look at someone is often analytical and critical. Most of our interactions stay at this level. But if it ever gets to the point where you can gaze deeply into the eyes of another,

...it is then that compassion, empathy and love engage. The early Christians realized what Meister Eckhart would later say, "The gaze with which we look back at God, is the same gaze that God, at first, looked at us."

We declared to you what was from the beginning, what we have now heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have gazed upon... and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life –

...this life was revealed, we have seen it, and testify (literally, "maturou-men", from the word martyr) we have seen it and "martyr" to it, and declare/witness to you the eternal life that was with the Abba and was revealed to us

...and we are declaring this to you, at great risk, that we may have fellowship with you and our joy may be complete. Why? Because, Martha, there is only one thing. Nothing else matters.

Jesus is first known in relationship. Our God is a God of intimate personal encounter. This may all seem to go without saying but in our time,

...I think it is so important to remind ourselves that we know Jesus because others encountered him in the real world and then – years later, wrote about those encounters.

And so we say at this point, and say it very carefully and caringly, Jesus Christ is revealed not in the

first instance by a collection of books, but in and by those to whom he appeared, the witnesses who saw the Word of God in animate clay, who though they are long dead are still one with us in Jesus Christ as yet-living members of his body.

When I think of how so much of Western Christianity has struggled with evangelism, or witnessing or whatever we want to call it and how disastrous and even traumatizing it has been so disastrous over the last number years, I think where we have gotten lost...

...is that we have forgotten that the personal encounter, the hearing, the seeing, the gazing upon, eating with, sharing our home with, was primary way back then and it must also be primary now.

Instead of reading about Jesus and praying to a Jesus way off somewhere, we must recover a way of seeing and hearing Jesus who is still very much alive and present in his church.

We must recover the practice of gazing upon Jesus in prayer, not for minutes but hours. We must recover our sense of Jesus' presence with us in the communion meal...to, those beside us, touch the elements, the bread and wine...this is my body.

And the only way we are ever going to make any headway in our desire to see so many people in this land healed from trauma is if we gaze upon Christ in the poor, the marginalized, those suffering injustice because it is often in their company that he chooses to abide.

And when we read the bible, the record of first order experiences from the past, and read them in concert with the first order, in person experiences of in the church today, we are doing nothing short of

participating in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ together with the saints who first wrote of him.

Through baptism, prayer, fellowship, sacrificial service, gathering as a nationwide church yearning to hear a word, we are encountering the living Jesus Christ, just as his first followers knew him, just as everyone since has known him.

How I yearn for us to get to a place in Mennonite Church Canada where our collective life isn't so much fueled by our doctrines or confessions or covenants, though they are needed but are secondary work.

Rather, I yearn, I deeply yearn for us to be fueled by seeing, hearing, touching and gazing upon, contemplation. When we can do this well, putting up fences around the perimeter seems so much less important.

And that way, people won't see us so much as wanting to make all things Christian, rather, as Chris Green says, we seek to bear witness to the ways in which, in Christ, all things are made whole.

Over the years I have prayed for God to open our hearts and minds again, to take away all of the things that we do to protect ourselves, maybe even many of our comforts so that we can know deeply again,

...or even for the first time, that Jesus is first known in intimate relationship...and anything understanding we build around our faith is built on that relationship, that touch, that gaze, in the ebb and flow of losing and finding.

Near the end of our meal, I asked Safari what the hardest part of his refugee experience had been. He said, "The hardest part was when I found out that a man we took into our home and helped him recover from the

violence, was the man who killed my parents as they were fleeing the village.

What did you do? I did what I knew I had to do. I must forgive him and love him like a brother" "Has it been hard to do that?" "Yes, but it has also been a wonderful witness for Jesus."

"Do you think you will ever get out of the refugee camp?" He replied, "I had a chance several years ago. The United Nations offered me to go to the United States, but I declined. They thought that I had lost my mind."

I told them, "No, no, I have lost everything else, but I have not lost my mind. What has happened is that I have been found by Jesus and I can't leave his people.

Glory to God in the church and in Christ Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit through all generations forever and ever. AMEN