



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 19, SEPTEMBER 11, 2022
JEREMIAH 4:11-12, 22-28; PSALM 14; 1 TIMOTHY 1:12-17; LUKE 15:1-10

COMING HOME



Luke 15:1-10 *[All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "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. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."]*

Happy Homecoming Sunday! Whether you've been away, or you come every week,

or if you're new, we are glad that you are here. This cathedral was built to be a house of

prayer for all people, and today we celebrate the ways our common life takes shape in the array of ministries that arise in and from this place. Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here.

The occasion has prompted a good deal of thought for me about coming home, I suppose since I spent more time away this summer than usual. I rarely take time away in July or August, because why leave the Pacific Northwest at this time of year, right?!

But after a month in Britain on pilgrimage, when I returned home a few weeks ago, I was greeted by the three mammoth sunflowers we had planted at the deanery. They began as seed starts last spring, heliotropes transplanted into the ground in late May. When we left town in July they were about three feet high, gangly but hopeful in their green adolescence.

We asked a teenager down the street to keep things watered, but we weren't sure what would happen. Letting go was part of the work of pilgrimage, after all. But when we returned home to see the sturdy sunflower stalks some ten feet high with glorious heads of yellow and brown facing east, drooping under the weight of plump seed heads, their gift to us elicited sheer joy and awe at the transformation.

The sunflowers invited consideration of our own transformation, often so hard to see when measured in quotidian installments, but homecoming is a time to take stock of the changes in our spiritual lives, as individuals and as a community. Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here... but where are you on your spiritual journey? Where are we, as a community, on our spiritual journey?

Years ago, James Fowler wrote a book entitled *Stages of Faith*, in which he posited a few rather profound things that have shaped my understanding of the spiritual journey, and by extension, it has shaped how I envision the spiritual life of a community such as this. On this Homecoming Sunday, as we take stock of our common life, and celebrate together, I'd like to suggest a framework for us to engage the question, Where are we? Where are you?

First, I am convinced that all human beings are hard-wired to orient to a life of faith. We innately have this urge and inclination to orient to something larger than ourselves. To be sure, faith, in this sense, is not necessarily religious, or about specific belief systems; rather, faith is a person's way of making sense of life, a system of values, rituals, practices, and images that help one orient to that which

gives meaning in the context of something larger than self.

Fowler suggests faith is more verb than noun—the actionable discovery of spiritual meaning that shapes the way we live and move and have our being. It is more than creedal statements or an hour on Sunday morning; it is the roadmap for the whole of life, whether we are aware of it or not. It is a universal phenomenon of the human condition.¹

But that does not mean we all do it the same way, or on the same timeline. Fowler offers the science of developmental psychology and physiology to support his theory that there are common themes, or stages of faith, beginning with an affiliative, imitative faith of childhood, mimicking others in rather unquestioned rhythms. Parents, teachers, priests, politicians, celebrities—each can serve in this affiliative stage as locus of authority whose directives make sense... until they don't. Adolescence is a time of questioning that authority, breaking down the affiliative faith to see what works for the person in their own right.

At this point I should say that these stages are not age-specific; some people go through life never really needing to question or leave behind their affiliative faith. That doesn't

make them less faithful, but it may create challenges when those in authority do not measure up, when they foul up. It can be very disorienting then. A crisis of faith.

Others get stuck in a skeptical mistrust of all authority and cannot seem to break through to a new realm of spiritual awareness.

Hitting a crisis in any stage of faith can prompt a wilderness experience, or what the gospels might call a desert experience. A sense of being lost, bewildered, disoriented, scared. We all have these as part of the spiritual journey, sometimes briefly, sometimes for years.

Jesus' parable about the lost sheep in today's gospel is really about the shepherd who is there in the wilderness,



relentlessly searching for you, calling you, welcoming you back home, but the story is predicated on the notion of being lost... The Greek word translated as “lost” is actually a verb with dual meanings—either as misplacing something, or more poignantly

perhaps, it also means “experiencing or causing destruction.” In the wilderness times of life, in the raw reality of being lost, how often do we take on destructive attachments and addictions?ⁱⁱ

The spiritual journey is an invitation to lifelong patience, a willingness to unfold into a more mature, less anxious faith in which the meaning we seek is found in the unifying consciousness of cosmic connection. What St. Teresa of Avila described as the Interior Castle, where the magical and egocentric worldview of child-like faith yields into the radical union with God, discovered in a realm of interconnected joy, where metaphor, paradox and ambiguity no longer present stumbling blocks but become the prisms to see deeply into the meaning of life.

To be clear, wherever you are on your spiritual journey, the shepherd is there with

you, calling you to come home. It is the relentless call of a God of grace who promises that nothing in all creation—not you, not me, not a single atom of creation—is ever really separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus. It is eternal, unwavering, and universally given.

All of the ministries in this place, in whatever form they may take, are designed with this eternal truth of God’s love in mind. Every ministry is guided by a homecoming sense of connection and community, the guideposts designed to help us find our way on the journey. So on this day, this Homecoming Sunday, I would ask you again, Where are you?

And I would say once more, wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here. Welcome home.

ⁱ Flower, James W. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. Harper One, revised edition, 1995.

ⁱⁱ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1782