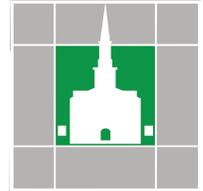


Value

Scripture text: Luke 15:1-32

The Rev. Matthew McCaffrey

Center Church on the Green, March 7, 2021



Somebody in my position is always aware that when we are preaching there is an audience listening. And preachers are usually pretty mindful of the actual people who are listening to us.

I had a nice telephone conversation with my mom the other evening, and so I know it's pretty likely that she is watching and listening to this message. I want you to know that, so you won't think I'm telling a story on her. What I'm about to say is something we've talked over many times through the years.

My mom is a collector. She really loves to put together anything that comes in a set or a series. I mean, really loves it.

She started collecting salt and pepper sets as a young girl. These were not what was on our family table at meals. Those



were made of aluminum and were very plain indeed. *[Note to readers: I found a photo of the actual shakers.]*

The sets she collected were more like souvenirs, the kind of thing you'd find in a gift shop at a tourist destination like Niagara

Falls or the Mark Twain House. Relatives and friends knew she liked them, so they in turn would bring her sets of shakers from their own travels. They'd also find interesting sets, like this one I ran across this week.



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She finally begged people to stop doing that about 20 years ago, but not before she had at least two thousand sets. And that was just the salt and pepper shakers.

Mom believed it was important that we have a lot to read and explore, so she subscribed to encyclopedias, and children's reading series, and pretty much everything that Time-Life Books ever published—those big, beautiful books about nature and geography and space travel and exotic animals. She had huge collections of the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew. And all of that certainly enriched and stimulated our imaginations and intellect.

As a child, though, I can remember a few...gaps...in those collections. Volume 7 of a big red Young Readers' set might be missing from the book cabinet. Or one of the records in a 3-LP set might have slipped its dust jacket and disappeared. It was unsettling, especially if it was something I'd seen or heard before.

But there were other delights in the collections, and I would learn to live with it. It was an early lesson in letting go of what was missing. It was a bit unsettling, and I'd always have the knowledge just below the surface that something was missing, but that's the way things were.

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And, I think that most of us have learned to do that same thing. When something is missing from a set, we learn to live with it.

Sometimes things wear out, or break, or get misplaced. I'm sure you're no stranger to the situation where you find you've unexpectedly run out of a household staple, let's say milk. You were positive you had some left, and now the container is gone, and eventually you go out and replace it. I won't speak to the circumstance of discovering that you put the milk away in a cupboard instead of a refrigerator.

As a group of Jesus' followers we learn to deal with missing pieces as well. We are familiar with the Apostle Paul's letter to the

Romans where he tells us that “as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we...are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”¹ That’s great when all those members are present and available to be part of the body. But when one or more are missing, or aren’t doing what we need or expect, we don’t function as well.

And we tell ourselves, well, okay, that one person is gone, but *I’m* here, and I’m loyal, and we’ll just carry on. And so we respond to the reality of missing members of our body by becoming resigned to it, by saying, “That’s just the way it is.”

Not that we’re happy about it, of course. We may see the person around town, or in a grocery store. We may read about their continued lives, their lives that don’t include being part of our body, and we may resent it. We may want them to pay a price if they ever DO come back.

And as for anyone else who comes along, church has a funny way of saying, we’re not so sure about you. You had a checkered life before you came here. We’re not sure you should be sitting in so-and-so’s old pew, or reading at services, or getting the same

¹ “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith;”
(Romans 12:4–6 [NRSV](#))

attention from the minister as those of us who have been here longer.

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And along comes Jesus who turns our resignation and resentment on its head.

Jesus is talking to the church establishment of his time...to the people who taught him how to read the scrolls, and to sit confidently in the synagogue, and how to make right sacrifices. He is talking to the people who have been there longer. He is talking to the faithful who resent that men and women of doubtful reputation even exist in their land, let alone being allowed to come and listen to this gifted teacher.

Jesus talks about the work of a shepherd, who could count one lost sheep as the cost of herding and say it's not worth it to go out looking for it while neglecting the 99 he still has. But that's not how shepherds work. They value all their sheep, and they rejoice when the one of doubtful connection can be returned to the herd.

Jesus talks about the work of a householder, who could count one lost coin as a casualty of her own carelessness and resolve to do better with the nine she still has. But that's not how prudent householders work. They value the resources it takes to run the house, and they rejoice when they find the single coin they lost.

Jesus talks about the pain of a father, who could chalk up his son's selfish wanderlust to his parenting mistakes and be thankful for the son he has who has remained behind. But that's not how parents work. They value all their children and love them as parts of themselves, and the return of a child who had wandered away is a cause for feasting and rejoicing.

The 99 sheep in the wilderness don't feel abandoned. The coin has nothing to say. But—there's that other son, who lays out his grievances and resentments over the extra burden he had become resigned to carrying, the wealth that had been carried away by his younger brother.

His resentment? That's where the church had better be listening because that's what Jesus is addressing in these stories.

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Being a follower of Jesus means examining what is important in God's economy. Hear that pesky word "celebrate" at the end of each story? That's what Jesus' peers, the church that had brought him into the faith and given him a pulpit, that's the word they don't want to hear. How do you celebrate the people who left? How do you celebrate people who have been out having fun, enjoying their Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings elsewhere, allowing you to carry their burdens in addition to your own?

If you become protective of the body that is left, missing members and all, well, that's understandable.

But these stories call us to reconsider our protective stance. What is the value of a missing sheep, or coin, or child? What is appropriate when we find what was lost?

Are we able to place a value on being found?

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This trio of stories is bigger than one sermon, or one church. I know they tell us to be aware that when even one person is missing from our fellowship, it is a loss for all of us. When we reject even one person whom Christ is calling to be with us, it is a loss for all of us.

The health of our life together depends on letting Jesus' wisdom work on us, and chase away weak resignation, and find cause to celebrate in the renewal of his church.

May that word continue to work on our lives. In Jesus' name.
Amen.