

Lost and Found

A couple of weeks ago, we introduced you to Elyce Travis, who is a US-2, which means she is appointed here at NOAH for the next two years by the United Methodist Church. She is serving as the Bag Lunch Coordinator for NOAH.

One of the things I like to do is when a new US-2 missionary comes to work here, I like to take them out to eat and get to know them a little better. So a few weeks ago, we went to Mi Pueblo in Mexicantown for lunch. She shared with me about her exploration of ministry and where she feels God is leading her to go in the future.

I shared where I went to college and seminary and her eyes about popped out of her head. Asbury?? How did you ever come out of Asbury???

For those of you who don't know, Asbury is one of the most conservative seminaries that United Methodist students can attend. Asbury College is even more conservative than the seminary and yes, I went to both and yes, I was grilled at my Board of Ordained Ministry interviews because of it.

I went to college seven years after I graduated from high school, when I finally answered my call into ordained ministry. So I was a 24 year old student moving into the dorm with a bunch of 18 year olds! But those 18 year olds became my closest friends.

Each class at Asbury had a name and we were called the Olympian Class because the Olympics were in 1984 when we started there.

Now, I was a nobody in high school and I wanted to be popular in college so I made sure I got to know lots of people and got involved in a lot of things. I was a class secretary, and the class chaplain, and participated in prayer meetings, and served on different leadership boards. Since I was older, people came to me for counsel as I earned the name "Mama Jill."

Those days were wonderful and I loved so many people I attended school with. However, I received a lot of education that I took for granted as the truth. I took it in and felt I had no need to question what I was being taught.

I graduated from Asbury College in 1988 and moved across the street to Asbury Theological Seminary. I moved off campus and became involved in Youth for Christ and did street ministry with the youth who gathered at Triangle Park on the weekends in Lexington. I earned their trust and listened to their stories of how the church had hurt them and they had turned their back on anything having to do with God.

It was there that my Asbury learned theology started to not fit in with what I was experiencing with those youth. I wrestled with the fact that these kids came from good Christian homes and had been kicked out and were living on the streets because of their sexuality. I wrestled with this and began to study more about what scripture "really said." I asked a professor if I could do an independent study on homosexuality and the scriptures and was turned down.

I graduated from Seminary in 1992 and moved to Detroit to start pastoring, but still had questions. I went to my first class reunion in 1993 at the college and was greeted with open arms by my friends from the college. And the same thing happened in 1998 for my ten year reunion.

By then, though, I had started learning and seeing a new theology, one where God doesn't condemn and Jesus loves unconditionally. I started becoming an advocate for those who were suffering with AIDS, and trying to protect patients from pastors who wanted to be chaplains to "save their souls" before they died.

As you may know, my doctoral thesis is “Changing Attitudes Toward Homosexuality – a Journey in Transformational Education.” When I went back for my reunion after becoming a Doctor of Ministry, people weren’t accepting me with open arms any more. My beliefs no longer lined up with their beliefs and I guess they didn’t know what to do with me anymore.

As I became a vocal advocate for human rights, I started being blocked on social media by those who were my closest of friends. And now I just don’t go to those reunions anymore because I just don’t feel I belong there anymore.

Have you ever felt like a lost sheep – distant from a community you once belonged to and wondering if anyone notices you’re not around anymore?

It’s no coincidence that Jesus shares these stories of loss and restored relationship each ending with communal celebration. He does it right after he is chastised for sharing tables with others. Every single story, even in the prodigal son which is not in our reading for today, talks about collective eating and celebrating restoration.

Jesus is telling stories of restored community. Wholeness. Repair.

Sophia Park, in her article, “A Deconstructive Reading of Luke 15:8-10 draws our attention to the fact that the lost coin did not roll away by choice and was not taken away by someone else – the woman herself is responsible for losing the coin. The scripture is clear on this matter, noting her responsibility two separate times.

It is not difficult to make a similar case of the lost sheep – who is responsible? The single sheep who is under the authority of the human? Or the human?

When someone goes missing from a place they once had community or a sense of belonging, the easiest thing to do is to presume the problem is theirs. But these parables invite a different response – as we think about both those who, in recent years, were once a part of our communities but no longer are, or in the broader sense, communities that have not historically been welcome in the first place or have been harmed enough times that there’s no longer a place for them.

Sometimes the reason people go “missing” is coming from within the community. If we choose to interpret the stories as examples of how we – or how the church – loses people, we are challenged to recognize that sometimes it is simply our collective fault.

When the laws and rules of the community of God become barriers to the practices of love and community, they distort the purposes of our faith. At times, we must be willing to go to seemingly absurd lengths to restore what has been broken. To correct our mistakes. To reach out with repentance and willingness to do things differently.

And not necessarily to have them come back – they may have no desire to do so. But we can and should, still seek to repair the harm we have done whether or not the sheep decides to stick around the 99.

The church should desire to repair the harm that has been done to LGBTQIA+ people without the ultimate goal being more LGBTQIA+ people in the church. The kind of losing and finding in the parables points towards restoring the community but to jump from restored community to “attending our church” would be quite a leap.

I want us to think about ways the church can repair relationships with communities that have been harmed with an agenda grounded more in relationship and righting wrongs than with getting people into the pews.

Who has the church lost because of its rigid commitment to orthodoxy, because of its entanglements of prejudice and theology, or because of its alignment with the norms of power today?

While Jesus is busy keeping company with those on the fringes of society, we can get so comfortable with the 99 around us or with the 9 coins we have that we don't even recognize who is missing. Or what they might say about us. Or how it might affect the ways in which we perceived God.

When we focus on the barriers that have been put up – often related to racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ableism – or transphobia – we can easily get overwhelmed by what it takes to overcome them. The work is costly – sometimes economically, often relationally, always spiritually. Is it worth it, really, to consider matters of how to support trans people if only 1 in 1000 people are trans? Is it worth it, really, to consider matters of physical accessibility to the Table if only one person is incapable of reaching it, because of a disability? Is it worth it, really, to stop using language that associates “darkness” with lostness, immorality, or other negative aspects of life if only one person in a congregation finds it racially offensive?

Jesus shares with us these stories of going to great lengths to restore that which is broken, to make whole a community that will never be its best self until barriers are removed or shifted.

Because we are not Jesus, and because we, who are part of the institutionalized church often reflect more of the history of power and oppression in this country than not...unlike Jesus, we cannot and should not expect those who have been cast out or cast aside to then “come near and listen.”

The table needs reversing. It is the ones who didn't notice those missing, or the ones who sent them away, that become the ones who need to draw near and listen” recognizing the “lost sheep” or the “lost coin” being the ones in whom we might experience Jesus.

When we desire to live into repaired and restored relationships with those either we – or our communities or our histories – have done harm to or have neglected, the posture with which that work should be done is one of humility. Of listening. Of not presuming what that repair will need to look like, but asking what's desired, what's helpful, what's actually going to foster restoration.

Jesus' parables challenge us to ask to what lengths we are willing to go to be a part of God's work in the lives of others. This should not entice the privileged to assert over the marginalized that they must constantly practice endless patience and endurance in having the same destructive conversations with people, or that these conversations are enough to lead to systems change.

These parables shouldn't serve the dangerous suggestion that Jesus is simply practicing a “don't exclude the excluders” philosophy of false equivalency where everyone gets along without addressing the harm those with power are doing. The church has advanced that thinking for far too long, costing queer people, people of color, immigrants and others far too much in the name of tolerance and false peace.

At its best, the church is able to hold and teach the nuances of honoring one's own boundaries and paying attention to the energy level and safety and other factors that shape how we engage each other while also encouraging vulnerability and leaning into necessary relational conflict.

We need new approaches to old patterns of engaging in conversation. We need to be talking to each other; across difference, across identities, but we also cannot afford to keep arguing for talking to one another without recognizing who has the power in the dialogue.

There are significant differences in cost – spiritually and emotionally – between two white people discussing racism and a white person and a brown person having the same conversation – or two women discussing sexism verses a woman having to make a case for feminism with a man.

We can't keep treating the conversations the same, and yet, we must continue having them.

At the very least, our scripture for this morning asks us: If we are white, are we committed to the risks and work of bringing along other white folks who haven't yet begun to repent from practices of white supremacy? If we are straight, are we willing to remain at the table with other straight folks whose souls are not yet free from the constraints and destruction of bad theology?

If we are cisgendered, are we more concerned with appearing with the right crowd to uphold our public perception as allies, or are we most interested in investing where the work matters most – having the hard conversations with those we are in relationship with who are transphobic? Because we live in a time where association with someone or some people can be interpreted as affirmation of their belief or practices, we are challenged to dig deep and decipher what matters most to us – our reputation or what our impact on the world is.

We know that Christians have tried to evangelize “sinners” and its often been a practice of prejudice or control shrouded in religious garb, we can channel our desire to bring people along in liberation in a healthier direction. Not in a “better than thou” or a “be like me” or a “what’s wrong with you” kind of way. But in a “Wow! I’ve learned some things from others and it’s urgent and freeing and please join us because lives depend on it” kind of way.

Who and how are we willing to risk our own reputation for the sake of work that matters? For the sake of bringing people along with us on this journey of faith? For the sake to taking what we have learned and offering it to others who need to for their own souls and to disrupt the harm they might be complicit with?

I started this message about my time as an Olympian, Class of 1988 and how over the years, as my theology changed, my friends moves away and distanced themselves and I felt like the lost sheep or the lost coin. But then I was invited to a new group. A closed group on Facebook called LGBT Asburians and Allies. The amazing thing was, the gentleman that started the group searched me out to find me and ask me to join the group as an ally because of what my friendship meant to him all those years ago. I was searched for and I was found and my heart rejoiced.

May we as individuals and we are a congregation, look for those who have been left out, maybe because of us, or in spite of us, so that we may all join together in a festival with lots of food and lots of drinking all kinds of beverages because those who were lost have now been found.

Let me leave this thought with you, before I close. It's not just those on the outside of the walls that need transformation. Sometimes, transformation needs to happen right here inside the church. Maybe it be so. Amen.