

Lectionary 24C 2019, September 15, 2019, Luke 15:1-10, Third to Last Sermon at Emmanuel, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

When I was a newly ordained pastor serving a congregation in the New Jersey Synod I was invited to join a group of other pastors who gathered once a month for theological conversation, prayer, and study. They were mostly pastors serving in the Metro New York area, so they came from northern New Jersey, New York city, and the suburbs and towns around New York. They called themselves the Timotheans, named after the young pastor addressed by Paul the apostle in two letters which are part of the New Testament. The group formed many years before I joined and was comprised of a group of younger pastors who wanted a group of their own. You see, there was already a group of pastors meeting for much the same purposes, but those pastors were older at the time. By the time I joined the group the young Timotheans were already old. I was the only young pastor there, having been invited mostly so I could drive an elderly pastor who had once been a young Timothean but now lived in the town I served. The original group had long since dissolved due to age, the young Timotheans were old, and now, 35 years later, are themselves dissolved.

I was once a young Timothean, the kind of pastor an older Saint Paul wrote letters of advice to. Now, with just a few weeks left of my call here at Emmanuel, I still think of myself like a young Timothy. But I know I'm not. I'm really more like Paul, hopefully a bit more wise, certainly more experienced than when I began my ministry 36 years ago. When I was first ordained I sought out the counsel of older, wiser pastors to help me through those first years of ministry. My father-in-law Pastor Burkins, the senior pastor in the congregation I first served, and about a half-dozen retired pastors in that congregation all served as wiser St. Paul's to this younger Timothy. Now, I find myself on the other side of that relationship, speaking from experience and I hope some wisdom.

But I will admit that the approaching end of my tenure here feels unsettling. The other day a fellow pastor asked me how I was feeling, and I said, "a little like walking a tight-rope without a net." There are probably other analogies that are equally descriptive; walking into a darkened room not knowing what's there, starting a journey that you don't know the destination. Maybe you're feeling a bit of that yourself. What's the future going to be like without our pastor whom we've known for so long? Who will come in his place? What will she or he be like?

These questions, both yours and mine, point to loss. I am losing you as the community in which I have served. You are losing me, the pastor you've listened to, allowed to minister to you, lead you in worship. Loss is hard. Loss can hurt. Loss is also very real. Sometimes we avoid it, and try to minimize it. We push it down or away, going about our business. But that doesn't help. If I've gained any

wisdom through experience it's the necessity of acknowledging the loss and owning the grief we feel. I know there will be days ahead when both Lois and I will grieve for these days and years we have shared together.

And yet. For thirty-two years I find myself returning again and again to these words, "and yet." For they signify that whatever situation we find ourselves in, whatever tragedy or loss or struggle there is a word of hope and promise that comes from beyond our loss and joins us here in the present. And yet, God seeks out those who experience loss and restores them to wholeness and hope. That's at least part of the message we hear this morning. Jesus speaks of those who lost something: a sheep, a coin, and in a third parable, a son.

There is much to say about these parables but at their heart they are about becoming lost and then being found. They speak to me, this morning. They are very realistic about loss. They do not promise that we will never lose something precious or important to us. Again, I know this from personal experience. I also know it through many of you and your own experiences of loss. You've blessed me by allowing me the profound privilege to step into your lives when you grieve and when you feel lost yourselves. We've sat silent vigil at bedside, we've prayed together, we've embraced and wept. And it's not just been myself. I've seen others drawn into the circle of friends and family during times of loss. It's true that grief over loss is an intensely personal experience. No one can grieve for you. But even though it's personal it doesn't always mean that's it's only private either. We are joined to one another, in our experiences, but more importantly in our faith. Our faith in the God who never leaves us, who always walks with us, who grieves when we grieve.

To me that's what's so beautiful about these parables Jesus tells about being lost and found. Because at their heart these parables reveal to us who Jesus is and what he brings to us. Jesus lives, and because he lives he is free to seek out all who are lost, all who experience loss, and restore them to wholeness and community. This is who God is, this is what God is like. This is the great "and yet" to our sorrow over what we have lost.

I will admit I am learning what all this means. Maybe you've noticed over the years that many of my sermons are as much preaching to myself as they are preaching to you. They are the times when I need to be reminded we experience the hope and comfort of Jesus' love even in the midst of our grief and loss. So, yes, in many ways these days feel very much like uncharted territory, which is exactly how feeling lost is experienced. Like walking into a darkened room and not being able to see; or starting a journey when we don't know where we are going. But we know, because Jesus lives and nothing stands in the way, he is always our homecoming, our destination, and our rest. Amen.