

Sunday Sermon January 17, 2021

“Amazing Grace” – “I once was lost but now I’m found...”

Today’s Gospel tells us that “Jesus found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” Jesus found him...

Once upon a time, a woman was calling her friend next door. The phone rang and little Billy answered “hello” – she recognized it was him – “hi Billy, is your mom there?” Billy replied “Yes” – “can I talk with her?” “No”

Somewhat perplexed, the friend asked: “is your dad there?” “Yes” – “can I talk with him?” “No” – now really confused the neighbor asked: “well, is your sister there?” “Yes” – “can I...?” No. Now almost exasperated, the neighbor said: “Billy, your mom, dad and sister are all there, but they can’t talk come to the phone and talk to me. What are they doing?” And Billy replied: “Looking for me!”

Looking for me... Little Billy wasn’t lost, but he was hiding. Why might be the topic of another sermon. Today, I’m using that illustration to make a point about Jesus calling the disciples in today’s passage from John.

It says Jesus found Philip. Found him. That indicates that maybe Philip was hiding like little Billy, or maybe he was lost. Lost and Jesus came looking for him, as in our psalm today – beautiful Psalm 139: “Lord, you have searched me out and known me.” “searched me out...”

Discipleship, in John, is about being found.

While little Billy in my story wasn’t too interested in being found, there’s a lot of finding in John’s account of Jesus calling his disciples.

It tells us that Jesus “found” Philip. Philip, in turn, found Nathaniel, and Philip tells Nathaniel that they’ve found Jesus. Nathaniel finds out that Jesus knows a lot about him.

It’s a story rooted in the experience of being found or finding your way. If you’ve ever had that experience, you know what a wonderful feeling that is. You’re out in the woods enjoying the beauty, and suddenly your surroundings don’t look familiar anymore. You’re lost and begin to panic, and then you see a familiar landmark.

Or you're out on a boat at night and you become disoriented until you see the light you're looking for, and you have a huge sense of relief (you can tell my boating experiences were pre-GPS). Once lost, you can now find your way.

But sometimes being lost isn't physical, it's emotional or spiritual. There's the feeling of being lost when a loved one dies, or you or a loved one receive a bad diagnosis, or you go through a divorce, or lose a job suddenly.

One can be lost in addiction, or so committed to carrying a grudge that it's difficult to move forward in life. It's being lost.

There's spiritual lost-ness. Distanced from God and self, living in a way that is at odds with who God created you to be, a reflection of God's love.

I sang a verse from the very famous hymn: Amazing Grace at the beginning of this sermon. It said "I once was lost, but now I'm found." Anglican priest John Newton wrote those famous words. Being saved by the grace of God was very profound and personal for John Newton because before he was a priest, he was captain of a slave ship. He transported kidnapped human beings, children of God, from Africa to England until he came to his senses after a conversion experience. He realized he was lost, recognized the horror of his actions, turned his life around and committed to working against slavery.

The first step in following Jesus, of being found by Him, the first step in the way of love, is to turn. Turn away from sin. Turn from what is not life-giving, what is not of God, and follow the one who leads us to new and everlasting life.

Most conversion stories are not as dramatic or profound as John Newton's, but there are many ways that we can become lost, and sometimes we don't even realize it.

About 6 months after we adopted our daughter, the three of us were at a department store. I thought she was with Sue, Sue thought she was with me (truth be told, I was supposed to be watching her...), when we realized neither of us had her, sheer panic ensued. We frantically search around the cloths racks, hearts pounding, adrenaline rushing, until we came upon her, hiding behind the shirts, giggling. A little game of hide and seek for her, I'll never forget the feeling of relief – pure joy – when we found her.

I imagine that's how God feels when we come to our senses and allow ourselves to be found. I imagine that's how God felt when John Newton finally opened his eyes to see that he was transporting precious human beings, walked away from that life, and then worked against it.

We might think of discipleship, which we refer to as following Jesus, as us pursuing Him. And this is true. We seek to pattern our lives after His, we strive to live out the compassion, forgiveness, peace, justice and the love that He came to live and to die for.

But it's also true, and John's account of Jesus calling the disciples points this out, that God pursues us. God seeks us out, like the hound of heaven, from our lost places, from our hiding places, from our wayward ways. Francis Thompson's poem "The Hound of Heaven" paints a picture of a hound relentlessly following a hare, never ceasing in its pursuit, single-minded in its focus. So does God follow the fleeing soul, Thompson would contend, by God's Diving Grace until the soul turns to God.

God is ever and always after us, seeking to draw us more deeply into God's life, new life, freely offering the gift of unconditional love to change us and to transform our world.

You may be feeling a bit lost these days. I know I am. This pandemic, political and racial strife, violence, fear.... It is difficult to recognize the world around us, and so it is good to be reminded, this day, that God seeks the lost and finds them, as Jesus found those first disciples.

Little Billy was eventually found, and he was told the error of his ways, firmly, but with love. God seeks to find us in our lostness, that we will know the power of God's love.

May our prayer this day be that of the psalmist: "Lord, you have searched me out and known me" "and we thank you God for that Amazing Grace." Amen