

“Loiterers Wanted: Apply Within”

Sunday, February 25, 2007

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To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

“Loiterers Wanted: Apply Within”

“Change is very musical, but sometimes you must listen for a long time before you hear the pattern in his music.”

J. Ruth Gendler

READING *excerpt from “All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten” by Robert Fulghum*

IN THE EARLY DRY DARK of an October's Saturday evening, the neighborhood children are playing hide-and-seek. How long since I played hide-and-seek? Thirty years; maybe more. I remember how. I could become part of the game in a moment, if invited. Adults don't play hide-and-seek. Not for fun, anyway. Too bad.

Did you have a kid in your neighborhood who always hid so good, nobody could find him? We did. After a while we would give up on him and go off, leaving him to rot wherever he was. Sooner or later he would show up, all mad because we didn't keep looking for him. And we would get mad back because he wasn't playing the game the way it was supposed to be played. There's hiding and there's finding, we'd say. And he'd say it was hide-and-seek, not hide-and-give-UP, and we'd all yell about who made the rules and who cared about who, anyway, and how we wouldn't play with him anymore if he didn't get it straight and who needed him anyhow, and things like that. Hide-and-seek-and-yell. No matter what, though, the next time he would hide too good again. He's probably still hidden somewhere, for all I know.

As I write this, the neighborhood game goes on, and there is a kid under a pile of leaves in the yard just under my window. He has been there a long time now, and everybody else is found and they are about to give up on him over at the base. I considered going out to the base and telling them where he is hiding. And I thought about setting the leaves on fire to drive him out. Finally, I just yelled, “GET FOUND, KID!” out the window. And scared him so bad he probably wet his pants and started crying and ran home to tell his mother. It's real hard to know how to be helpful sometimes.

A man I know found out last year he had terminal cancer. He was a doctor. And knew about dying, and he didn't want to make his family and friends suffer through that with him. So he kept his secret. And died. Everybody said how brave he was to bear his suffering in silence and not tell everybody, and so on and so forth. But privately his family and friends said how angry they were that he didn't need them, didn't trust their strength. And it hurt that he didn't say good-bye.

He hid too well. Getting found would have kept him in the game. Hide-and-seek, grown-up style. Wanting to hide. Needing to be sought. Confused about being found. “I don't want anyone to know.” “What will people think?” “I don't want to bother anyone.”

Better than hide-and-seek, I like the game called Sardines. In Sardines the person who is it goes and hides, and everybody goes looking for him. When you find him, you get

in with him and hide there with him. Pretty soon everybody is hiding together, all stacked in a small space like puppies in a pile. And pretty soon somebody giggles and somebody laughs and everybody gets found.

Medieval theologians even described God in hide-and-seek terms, calling him Deus Absconditus. But me, I think old God is a Sardine player. And will be found the same way everybody gets found in Sardines – by the sound of laughter of those heaped together at the end.

"Olly-olly-oxen-free." The kids out in the street are hollering the cry that says "Come on in, wherever you are. It's a new game." And so say I. To all those who have hid too good. Get found, kid! Olly-olly-oxenfree.

* * * * *

SERMON

Getting Lost.

Getting Found.

It reminds me of the hymn, "Amazing Grace." You know the line where it says "I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind but now I see." I've heard that that hymn was penned by a man who went through a conversion process of sorts. "Between the Lines," a companion volume to the hymnal we use here at Fountain Street Church, records that the author, John Newton was a slave trader in the 1700's. At some point he was converted to Christianity and concluded (not that all Christians did, of course) that slavery was wrong. He became ordained and was an outspoken opponent of slavery.

I once was lost. But now I'm found.

Getting lost and getting found...hiding...fearing being found... seeking...wanting desperately to find that company that can envelop us, empower us, embolden us...

That can know us
And help us to know
that can call us or re-call us to our best selves
Getting lost...
Getting found...
Losing our way
and finding it again
losing our purpose
and finding it again
losing our people
and finding them again
Perhaps even losing ourselves
and finding ourselves again...
though different
different selves than those we lost

Another tale of someone “getting found”, though not usually presented this way, I think, comes in the Christian synoptic gospels. It’s recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke, but I like the version in Matthew best and I’d like to share it with you. It takes place just after Jesus is recorded as telling his disciples that he will have to die and be resurrected. In this story:

“Jesus took Peter and the two brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain to be alone. As the men watched, Jesus’ appearance was transformed so that his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light. Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared and began talking with Jesus.

Peter blurted out, ‘Lord, it’s wonderful for us to be here! If you want, I’ll make three shelters as memorials – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’

But even as he spoke, a bright cloud came over them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him.’ The disciples were terrified and fell face down on the ground.

Then Jesus came over and touched them. ‘Get up,’ he said. ‘Don’t be afraid.’ And when they looked, they saw only Jesus.”¹

This story is, among other things, another instance of someone “being found.” This is a core story for me in terms of how I view my work and our work together. We are here to help each other discover what we are for...what we are about in the world. And when we can do that...when we see it...it’s beautiful. We are transfigured. We are suddenly able to see who we are in light of those who have come before us. Our mission becomes clear. Our meaning becomes clear. We know what we are to be about.

And if we’re witnessing...if we happen to be fortunate enough to be lingering or loitering nearby when someone has that experience...we are awed and humbled by it. We may even be tempted to worship that person...to build them an altar...

and if we loiter longer...if we spend enough time with them...if we are able to work through our fear and our trembling...our awe...perhaps that person will come over and touch us...and say, “Hey...it’s just me.”

“And when they looked...they saw only Jesus.”

Getting found is about how we are together.

That’s why loitering is an important part.

Now...the traditional use of the word “loitering” entails an aimless quality that’s both relevant and misleading.

When the sextons put out the sign this past Monday with this sermon title on it, “Loiterers Wanted: Apply Within,” one of them asked me, “Hey! What are your office hours? I just want to know where to send the loiterers when they arrive.”

¹ Matthew 17:1-8 (NLT)

When I titled today's sermon I was thinking about hanging around, not *without* purpose, but with a *different kind* of purpose...

a purpose that is willing and able to be changed by those we encounter

a purpose that entails a kind of openness to transformation

an openness to creating and maintaining a place where folks can reveal themselves for who they are.

It stems from a little book I've been reading called "To Know As We Are Known" by Parker Palmer, educational guru and Quaker.

Palmer's project is to re-imagine education as a spiritual journey.

And as part of *my* purpose here
that's what I've been called to join you in doing
to re-imagine what it means to learn together.

Palmer suggests that education is really about "creating a space where obedience to truth can be practiced."

Let me say that again...education is about creating a space where obedience to truth can be practiced.

Now, even though it's a thin book and there's a lot more in it, it really is summed up in that.

Now...the truth that he's talking about is a shared truth...a truth that we discover together...a truth that is revealed when folks gather together in what he calls a community of "troth" – a community of faithfulness and loyalty...where promises are made and kept...as a matter of fact, he ties the concept of truth to the concept of troth...that the bonds which connect us to each other are those upon which we agree together...

"creating a space where we practice obedience to truth."

What would that look like?

One version of that might be found in the Connections groups that are forming in this church right now. These small group ministries have been aptly summed up by Matt Thomas, lead trainer here at Fountain Street, as "reverential relational groups."

Reverential
Relational

Wow. When was the last time you were engaged with another person in a reverential relationship?

I'm not talking about worshipping someone else.

I'm not talking about adoration.

I'm talking about a relationship in which you are tender and intentional and honest and caring – a relationship in which the troth you share...the commitment to the na-

ture of your relationship...is of primary importance...not your usefulness to each other, rather, the *quality* of your *relationship*.

That is what the Connections groups here at Fountain Street are about: creating quality relationships.

I imagine that in these communities of troth folks will learn to practice obedience to the truths they discover together.

I imagine that in these communities of troth folks will lose their old selves...and find new ones.

I imagine that in these communities of troth, folks will practice new ways of being... ways like those described by the prophetic poet, Marge Piercy, who wrote:

“We must sit down and reason together.

Perhaps we should sit in the dark. In the dark we could utter our feelings.

In the dark we could propose and describe and suggest.

In the dark we could not see who speaks and only the words would say what they say.

No one would speak more than twice. No one would speak less than once.

Thus saying what we feel and what we want, what we fear for ourselves and each other in

the dark,

Perhaps we could begin to begin to listen.

The women must learn to dare to speak, the men must learn to bother to listen.

The women must learn to say I think this is so.

The men must learn to stop dancing solos on the ceiling.

After each speaks, she or he will say a ritual phrase:

It is not I who speaks but the wind. Wind blows through me. Long after me, is the wind.”²

The kind of loitering I’m talking about,
the kind of being found that we’re after here, is about this—
about sitting down together,
about making and taking the time
about being attentive to how we are together.
Because once we are found it doesn’t end -
it’s not always laughter and fun, as suggested in Fulghum’s piece,

² “Councils” – #585 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.
Beacon Press, UUA. Boston, MA

there's bickering and disappointment, too.
But if we could begin to begin to listen
if some of us could dare to speak
while others of us could bother to listen
and if we could learn to listen to the truth that speaks through us
so that when folks start to fall down and worship
we can say, "Hey...it's just me."

But whoa! Wasn't that a cool truth we just discovered together?
Can this be a place where such things are learned together?

Where we seek to cultivate a culture of such loitering?
Of practicing that kind of obedience to truth?
Of making spaces to listen and speak and honor?

Is there such a place in your life?
A place where you practice those things?
A place where you feel *safe* practicing those things?

I know this is such a place for me.
I am learning to listen in a different way.
For all of my life I have been better at moving on than at staying put.

Simply being here is an exercise in loitering for me
an exercise in practicing reverential relationship
with my partner and his family

and here with this community at Fountain Street Church.

In my work in the learning ministries of this place
I am learning
I am practicing

And I invite you to do the same.

Let's get lost
and get found

together.