

Seek the Lost

Jeremiah 14:11-12, 22-28 Luke 15:1-10

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church

September 16, 2007

It is Kingdomtime and we have been talking about the kingdom of God, a central theme of the New Testament and the focus of the teaching of Jesus, who said, “Repent and believe the good news, for the kingdom of God is at hand.”

These are the things we have said about the kingdom of God so far:

The kingdom of God has broken into our midst through the ministry of Jesus, rearranging a broken world.

The kingdom of God is round, like King Arthur’s table. There are no hierarchies at the kingdom feast. It is not a seat-of-honor reserved kind of place. It is rather a welcome-table kind of place.

Kingdom living means traveling on a difficult road – an open-and-vulnerable-heart road. It is difficult to open our hearts to the cares of the world, but once we are on that path, there is no other way we would choose.

And today we see that the kingdom of God has open doors ... open doors not only so that the lost can come in, but open doors through which God goes out to gather wayward souls and bring them to the party.

I have two stories to share with you today. One is shorter and one is a little longer. One is about sin and the other is about redemption. One is about weeping and the other is about rejoicing.

Before I tell the stories, I want to remind you of what we have heard in the scriptures. Jeremiah is in the midst of a story of tears. Luke has told us stories that culminate with joyful celebrations.

Jeremiah’s story is about sin. He is a witness to the devastation of war. Israel, having turned from righteousness, being steeped in its own pride, denying its dependence upon God, is overrun by its enemies.

“My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war. Disaster overtakes disaster, the whole land is laid waste.” (Jeremiah 4:19-20)

This is the prophet’s voice. It is Jeremiah who is in anguish when he sees the people suffering, even though it is the result of their sin. But the prophet could just as easily be describing God’s own anguish, for God takes no joy in the demise of the people, and through the prophet continually pleads with them to turn around and seek the way of life.

My first story is about a very hardworking farmer. God appeared to this farmer and granted him three wishes, but with the condition that whatever the Lord did for the farmer would be given double to his neighbor. The farmer, scarcely believing his good fortune, wished for a hundred cattle. Immediately he received a hundred cattle, and he was overjoyed until he saw that his neighbor had two hundred. So he wished for a hundred acres of land, and again he was filled with joy until he saw that his neighbor had two hundred acres of land. Rather than celebrating God’s goodness, the farmer could not

escape feeling jealous and slighted because his neighbor had received more than he. Finally, he stated his third wish: that God would strike him blind in one eye. And God wept.

“They are skilled in doing evil,” says the prophet, “but do not know how to do good.”

But let us also hear a story of redemption. God does not only weep. God seeks, finds, redeems and rejoices ... like the shepherd traversing rugged terrain for the one lost; like the woman looking in every nook and cranny for a treasured possession.

The campers arrived on Sunday night. By Monday morning, someone was missing his hunting knife. By later that afternoon a baseball glove went missing. By suppertime that night, one of the campers was missing five dollars. One did not need to have "light years" of experience to know that the camp had a thief!

It is hard to say why kids eleven and twelve years old steal things, especially when they don't really need the things they steal. One thing, however, is for sure. They are really bad at it; and by Tuesday afternoon, they had the culprit.

"Why did you do it?" asked the camp counselor.

"I didn't do it," said the kid.

"We know you did it. We found the knife, the glove and the money underneath your bunk. Why did you do it?"

"I didn't do it."

"Look," said the counselor. "I'm going to give you a break. This is only the second day of camp and I'm going to forget any of this happened. I'll return the stolen stuff. We'll wipe the slate clean and start over. OK?"

"I didn't do it."

This kid acted like he wasn't afraid of anybody, and the whole time the counselor talked to him there was no expression on his face, no light in his eyes.

On Wednesday afternoon, in a rowboat out on the lake, he stuck a fish hook in another kid's leg. And there the two of them were again. The counselor and the kid with no light in his eyes.

"Why did you do it?"

"I didn't do it."

The counselor was clearly out of his league.

This was a Roman Catholic camp. So the director decided to give the kid to one of the nuns who worked there. Sister Ruth Ann was retired, but her only concession to old age was a pair of red gym shoes that peeked out from under her habit as she shuffled along from building to building, doing what her late father, who had been a handyman, had taught her how to do. She could repair anything. They called her Sister Fix-It.

The next morning she appeared beside the kid's bed and said, "Wake up and get dressed. I need you." Then it started. The other campers would be playing baseball. The nun and the kid would be out past center field planting something. The other campers would be swimming. The nun and the kid would be painting the side of the chapel. The other campers would be eating. The nun and the kid would be out on a bench together having lunch. Wherever you saw the nun you saw the kid. Wherever you saw the kid you saw the nun.

Instead of sending the kid home when the new campers came in, the parents and camp director agreed to leave him another two weeks. The new batch of kids did not

know the history of the kid with no light in his eyes and they would ask him, "Do you want to play baseball?"

He would look at her and she would say, "Go play baseball. Then meet me back here. We have work to do in the garden."

The other kids would be going horseback riding and would say to him, "Want to come riding?"

He would look at her and she would say, "You go riding. Then meet me back here and we'll paint the bench down at the lake."

And that's how it went for another two weeks. She let him out and she reeled him in. She let him out and she reeled him in. At the end of the two weeks, the kid was integrated into the life of the camp.

The day his parents came to pick him up, they waited with the camp counselor and director on the hill overlooking the camp. They all saw them at the same time. The old nun with the gym shoes and the kid. They were coming up the path that led down to the lake. Even at twelve he was taller than she was. The kid had a smile on his face, and light in his eyes. Sister Fix-It had her hand on his shoulder and a glow on her face like a woman who had found a coin she had long searched for. (Adapted from a story by Fr. John Sheaⁱ)

That story comes from Father John Shea, who has a name for the story. He calls it, "And God wore Red Gym Shoes."

We celebrate today the educational ministries of our church. We pray that the doors of our classrooms will be open, that our teachers and learning companions will be welcoming, and that persons will experience transformation. Transformation may happen as we encounter the Word and experience in our hearts the redeeming love of God. And transformation may happen when meet Jesus in one another.

The kingdom of God has open doors, open for all of us lost souls to come in, to be forgiven, to let go of our jealousy, to be as generous with one another as God has been generous to us. And the doors are open also for our going out, to walk along side our wounded companion travelers and invite them to come home for a party. Let us rejoice together. Let us join our voices in song and give thanks to God who seeks and finds, lifts us and transforms us. Let all God's people say, Amen!

ⁱ "And God Wore Red Gym Shoes" from *Keeping the Faith in Babylon* A pastoral resource for Christians in Exile Barry J. Robinson @ <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/c-or24-keeping.php>