

WHO'S TELLING?

1 Timothy 1:12-17

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Luke 15:1-10

September 15, 2019

TEXT: 1 Timothy 1:15-16 The saying is true and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.

PURPOSE: To honor the ways that we have received mercy through Christ Jesus, and to celebrate the ways that our stories of saving grace serve as examples for others.

“I love to tell the story.” So we sang today. The song is an old favorite. People who have been around churches for a long time get right into it. But here’s the question: who does love to tell the story? Who loves to tell how Jesus changed our life? Who loves to tell that story to those who come here wondering if this is a place where lives are changed for the better?

Today’s scripture passages tell of a few people who loved to tell the story. Paul, the fellow who started out opposing the Jesus movement, was more than willing to tell his young protégé Timothy the story of how he received mercy and was appointed to Christ’s service. I once was lost, Paul said, but now I’m found. I was blind, blind to who Jesus really was and what he could do for people, but now I see, and the seeing makes me want to share his saving power with others. Paul was unabashed and unembarrassed in the telling of his story. I was a dreadful sinner, he declared. I was working directly against what God was doing in the world. But God’s saving power didn’t pass me by. God wasn’t going to give up on me. Mercy overtook me, and now, look at what’s become of me!

The people in Jesus’ two parables, the shepherd who found his lost sheep and the woman who found her lost coin, were bubbling over with their stories. Each of them threw parties and invited everyone they knew to an event celebrating the finding of what they had lost. Here’s this big party, and the shepherd is running around hugging everyone while he shouts, “I found my sheep! I found my sheep!” And he’s so enthusiastic that his guests start jumping up and down with him. The woman is so overjoyed at finding her coin that she spends it to throw a party for her neighbors, who can’t imagine why finding that coin is such a big deal, but get in on the celebrating anyway, just because her joy is so contagious.

Does anybody here get that excited about the telling the story of how God found you when you were lost? I have a story that I love to tell. It is both about losing something I valued, and about God finding me. It’s not a particularly religious story. It could have happened to any one of us here, and that’s the most

important point of my telling this story—that, with just a bit of looking back on our lives, we can find stories we would love to tell about how we found ourselves in the wonderful story of Jesus and his love.

My story begins with a confession: when Lindy and I traveled to Zimbabwe the first time, in 2007, I packed way too much stuff. I could have gotten away with about half of the clothes and gear I carried. In my carry-on backpack, just for instance, I packed my laptop computer, a digital camera, a camera tripod, a Bible and a few books, and the notebook holding the sermon I was going to preach at our partner church as well as all the information about our trip. After thirty three hours in transit, our delegation arrived at the Harare airport at six o'clock in the morning. You can just imagine how on top of things we were. We anxiously watched luggage go round and round on the rack, and found every piece except for one of our fellow traveler's suitcases, but that's another lost and found story, not mine. We piled everything on trolleys and pushed them out of the airport. Our hosts were waiting outside for us, and we got acquainted with much excitement. They had hired a combi—these are large vans that work like taxis—and we piled our luggage and ourselves into it for the hour long trip to the game park where our hosts had wisely planned a day of rest for us. When we got to the game park and unloaded the van, I realized that my carry-on backpack— you know, the one with all that valuable stuff in it—was not among the bags. Our hosts made some attempts over the next few days to check back with the airport, but there was no sign of the pack. So that's what I lost.

Now for the part about God's mercy finding me. That first day, I found my emotions vacillating between moping about what I'd lost and being overwhelmed at the experience I was actually having. In a relatively short time, I found that I was able to let go of the pack and its contents, except for that sermon, about which I was dreadfully anxious. When Lindy and I got to the house of the pastor of our partner church the next day, I asked for paper so I could write down what I remembered of the sermon, and discovered that he only had scrap paper in his house. How much we Americans take for granted.

Over the next week, as we built friendships and toured the country, I mused about the loss of that backpack and its contents. Among those people who are spiritually rich even though they are so materially deprived, my musing inevitably

forced me to confront my own materialism. I had thought I really needed all that stuff, and here I was, getting along very well without it. What had me believing I needed all the things I think I need, not just what was in that pack, but all the stuff I've accumulated? My musings wound up being confessions of sin, the sin of relying too much on ourselves and the things we have made, the sin of overvaluing stuff. The converging of those inner musings with our constant confrontations with the materially difficult circumstances of the people of Zimbabwe loosened up my materialism in a way that came to me as forgiveness, or, to quote St. Paul, as "the grace of our Lord overflowing for me with the faith and the love that are in Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 1:14)

I came back from Zimbabwe to all the stuff I still enjoy having. I confess that I made no attempt to sell everything I had so that I could have treasure in heaven. But I do retain a attitude toward the things I have that is decidedly less attached.

During the week that we were in Zimbabwe, we traveled far away from Harare, where the church with which the church I previously served was partnered. But we returned to Harare for a big Sunday worship and a Monday departure. On the day of our departure, the head deacon and the pastor of our partner church and I made an early morning trip to the airport, at least to formally make the report I'd need to file an insurance claim. I took one more exploration of the airport's lost and found room. My backpack was not among that luggage. One of us had the idea that we should also check out the local police. We walked across the parking lot to the small police station, where a few men were reading the newspaper and a young uniformed woman was standing behind the counter. The deacon explained my situation in the Shona language, and the officer said, in Shona but in a way I immediately understood, "Oh, that backpack! We have it here!" We couldn't believe our ears. Rev. Muzite's first response was, "This is the answer to our prayers." The stuff was worldly; but for him, the finding was spiritual. The pack had everything in it except for my camera and cell phone. Jubilant, we drove back to Rev. Muzite's house, where the rest of our delegation had gathered along with some people who had come to bless us on our way. We walked into the kitchen and announced that the backpack had been recovered. In response, the whole gang of folk from our partner church launched into a song of thanksgiving. "Rejoice with me," said the shepherd, "for I have found my sheep that was lost." "Rejoice with

me,” said the woman, “for I have found the coin that I lost.” I was almost embarrassed at the rejoicing that took place in that kitchen. But our Zimbabwean friends knew what I had been learning: this was a spiritual matter, not a material one, and there was indeed great cause for celebration.

St. Paul wrote that because he had been quite the sinner, he had received mercy, so that Christ would use him as an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. (1 Timothy 1:16) I know I received mercy upon mercy during that visit to Zimbabwe, and much of that mercy had to do with the loss and recovery of my backpack. Underneath all the ways that trip was changing our perspective on faith, on Christian community, and on what it means to live the gospel, God was doing a secret work in my own life, and I am delighted to share that secret with you this morning.

Okay. This is a unique story which is very specific to me. But that's exactly the point: I suspect that all of us have unique stories about how some external crisis, perhaps something much more serious than losing a backpack, provoked an internal spiritual process that opened us up to God's mercy in life-blessing ways. Those are the stories God gives us to tell. They are the stories which make the story of Jesus and his love real. And here's the really important thing about this: we all know people who need to hear the stories. Like the song says, even 'those who know it best,' those who are actively involved in a community of faith are 'hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.' Perhaps especially those of us who see each other often in church need to hear how God's grace is real in our lives. And then there's those 'who have never heard the message of salvation,' those who aren't so sure that Jesus loves even them, those who can't see how their story connects with the story of Jesus unless someone else tells a story which demonstrates that connection. The way the good news becomes good for them is when we share how it became good news for us, and that's as simple as telling a story from our own real life.

Who is telling that story? We all are, or at least, we all can. We can because God's plan is that each of us find ourselves right in the story of Jesus giving himself in love for the sake of our salvation. All we need to do is look for God's mercy coming our way, and then, to tell the story of what receiving that mercy was like. This is how God draws the whole world into the life God designed us to live.