FINDING THE LOST

Luke 15:1-10

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

How many of us remembered that last Sunday was the first anniversary of 8:56 REJOICE? We gathered for the first time as an 8:56 REJOICE group on the first Sunday after Labor Day in 2006 so we are actually a week late in remembering. As we started we embraced Psalms 85:6 as our theme verse. It is a verse which says,

Will You not revive us again,
so that Your people may rejoice
in You?

We started out not knowing exactly where God was leading? The first sermon I preached in this setting was from Isaiah 43:19 which says,

I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not
perceive it?

Indeed, there were many things we experienced as new. New music. A new way of preaching. A new setting for worship. A new atmosphere. In the beginning we were overwhelmed with all the unknown. It was something we were convinced spoke of the leading of the Holy Spirit and so we moved forward into a future that was filled with a blank canvas upon which we would create the design of this worship experience.

But, aside from the obvious new dimensions of this service, we sensed that God desired to do something new in our midst. As we move into our second year, we stand at a precarious place. We are no longer new, but a year old. We have developed our ritual. We are comfortable with what the service has become. The excitement experienced in the beginning as been replaced by expectations that no longer anticipate something extraordinary. Some would say we have become institutionalized. We are in danger of losing the fervor of being a new movement of the Holy Spirit.

It was our prayer and hope in the beginning that this style of worship would provide a place for those not connected to Christ or the church so that they could find a home where that connection could be embraced. If there is any part of our initial vision that we seem to have lost, it is this one. We have retained the vision for a new and more contemporary style of worship. Unfortunately, we have let the style of worship become an end itself and we have forgotten that the original intent centered not just around our need to worship God in a new way, but our sense that we were being called to create a worship experience for those outside of the church and outside of a relationship with Jesus Christ. We must not lose this vision. If we lose it, we cease being in partnership with the Holy Spirit who desires to do something new in our midst.

The gospel lesson for the day centers around a people who had lost touch with God's vision for them and substituted a lesser one. The passage creates a picture of Jesus

surrounded by tax collectors and sinners. Once again Jesus is associating with those who are regarded by respectable folks as the despicable ones of the community. The Pharisees and scribes are also there on the fringe of the crowd. These leaders of religion and respectability are complaining and grumbling among themselves; yet, with enough volume to be overheard by Jesus. Verse 2 enables us to hear their grumbling.

This fellow(Jesus) welcomes sinners and
eats with them.

In response to what he is hearing from the religious ones, He tells two parables. The first is about a shepherd; the second is about a woman. Shepherds were at the bottom of the economic ladder and women were at the bottom of the social ladder. The shepherd lost one sheep and left ninety-nine to find the one lost. The woman lost one of her ten coins and turned her house upside down searching until she found it. When the shepherd finds his lost sheep and the woman finds her lost coin, Jesus has them both saying to their friends,

Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was
lost….or the coin that I had lost.

And while the language is just a bit different, the essence of what Jesus says at the conclusion of both parables is the same. What we hear is from the heart of God,

I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels
of God over one sinner who repents.

The Pharisees had forgotten that they were God's special people whose purpose was to be a light to the people of all nations. Their very existence was about pointing the world toward God. By the time of Jesus they had forgotten that vision and in its place substituted preserving the status quo of their religious community. We do not cast stones at the Pharisees because we know how little time it takes to forget and how easy it is to make the same substitution. The Holy Spirit called this new worship service into existence not to add to the religious programs of our church, but to enable Him to do a new thing in our midst. It was our conviction in the beginning that it would be a place which would draw new people to Christ Jesus. Our rejoicing would not just be over the sounds of new music, but over the sounds and sights of new people coming to know Jesus Christ.

What are we doing to move along this new thing the Holy Spirit wants to do in our midst? When was the last time we invited someone to attend this worship service with us? When was the last time we handed someone one of our 8:56 Rejoice pens and told them about it? When was the last time we shared with another person what Jesus Christ means to us? When was the last time we rejoiced and celebrated in this worship setting because someone came to know Jesus? It is not going to happen unless we decide right now that this is why we are here in this 8:56 Rejoice worship. It is not going to happen unless we come expecting to be equipped for just such a purpose.

The difficulty for us is not that we are fearful. It is not that we lack the conviction that faith in Jesus is the most important decision in life. The great difficulty is that we

surround ourselves with other believers. Most of us have very few friends who are not Christian. The longer we are a Christian, the fewer non-Christian friends we have. Yet, opportunities abound. Will there be more people at home, or at Wal Mart, or at the grocery store, or on the river this morning than at church services in this community? The answer tells us we do not live in a community empty of opportunity to invite others to come to this place where there is great potential for them to become connected to Jesus through faith. The answer tells us that there are many around us live without a vital faith in Jesus Christ. When we see them, we see the reason for 8:56 REJOICE. We see the new thing God wants to do here. We see the reason God wants to give for rejoicing.

As we begin this second year of 8:56 REJOICE, I ask you, will you re-claim the vision of God for this ministry? Will you ask God to show you people this week whom You can invite to join us? Will you ask God to put you into the lives of others in such a way that you will be able to share your faith in Jesus Christ? What do you say? God still wants to do a new thing. He still wants us to be a part of it? What do you say? It is time for us re-claim God's vision!

This sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Strickland at the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia on September 16, 2007.