

Trusting God and Ministering to All People as Christ Teaches Us in the Gospel

**"Ministering to All People"
The Second of Four Sermons on our Church Mission Statement**

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-32

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green
September 15, 2013

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? (Luke 15:4)

Rick Morley writes,

Nobody. No one does this. No one would ever do that.

It's insanity. If you lose 1% of your holdings, you don't risk losing the 99% of your holdings to get it back. By leaving the 99, you risk them roaming off, being stolen, or being killed and eaten by a wolf.

No one leaves the 99.

Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' (Luke 15:8-9)

Again, Rick Morley:

Nobody. No one does this.

You don't call friends and neighbors together for a celebration only to spend more money feeding and entertaining them than what you found was worth. I mean why bother looking for the coin at all, if you're just going to blow more money anyway?

It's insanity. Nobody does this.

Except Jesus.

Jesus does this. Jesus leaves the 99 to search for the lost. Jesus sweeps the house

and then throws a party when the lost are found. It's totally and thoroughly insane. And, that's why the Gospel is such Good News.

When a soul is lost, the soul is missed, longed after, and not only worth the search party, but worth the celebration-party when the soul is brought back into the fold.¹

Our mission at the Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green is, "Trusting God and **ministering to all people** as Christ teaches us in the Gospel." Today's sermon is the second in our series for September and today we are addressing the second portion of that statement, those four little words that make for such a sweeping statement of intent:

Ministering to all people.

We--the 60 or 70 of us who get ourselves here most Sundays--have before us the "modest" little task of "ministering to *all* people." (Did you notice the word, *all*?)

Is it fair to ask so much of ourselves? Does it make sense? Aren't we setting ourselves up for failure? Isn't that a tad... ambitious? To borrow an opening line from Jesus, let us ask ourselves,

Which one of you, having a volunteer organization of modest size and resources, and needing to focus on a vision for the future, does not set out to reach "all" people?

Isn't that, in the words of Rick Morley, "totally and thoroughly insane"?

I would answer that rhetorical question with a resounding "yes." Yes, it's nuts to ask that of ourselves. Yes, it's insane, or something close to that. And that is why this mission statement is so good! In it, you ask of yourselves nothing less than Jesus asked of his listeners in the three "Lost" parables that we read today.

The three "Lost" parables have main characters who are recklessly extravagant in their expenditures of time and money. The shepherd makes an unthinkable calculation--better to leave 99 sheep unattended so as to bring home the one who was lost. The widow blows a large portion of the value of the silver coin she has found to throw her party for her neighbors. And the father, in the story of the prodigal son, seems to be a bit wasteful himself, lavishing even more of his wealth on a party for the son who has wasted so much already.

If the main characters in each of these stories represent God, then we learn that there are no limits on God's love. The word inexhaustible comes to mind. Whereas it would be ridiculous for an actual shepherd to leave 99 sheep in order to search for one that is missing, the hyperbole in this story is necessary to get us to understand that God's love doesn't follow human rules of engagement.

For God, love is not a zero sum game. If God loves the lost sheep, and the prodigal sons, that does not mean that God doesn't love the dutiful sheep and the elder brothers. God is that most unusual of fathers who will throw the party of the century for his complete and utter failure of a son, and then walk out of that very party to stand in the dark and squander even more time and energy on his other son, whom he also loves extravagantly and inexhaustibly.

In developing this mission statement, you have said that our mission is to minister to all people. By that, I presume you mean that it is your mission to love like the three main characters in the "Lost" parables in Luke 15. Is it impossible? Yes. But let's not let that get in our way!

To aspire to anything less would be to rob the Gospel of its audacity. To aspire to anything less would distort the Good News of Jesus Christ to something that it is not.

Christ Jesus came into the world to seek and to save the lost. Who are the lost? I think we would have to say, all people, ourselves included. All have sinned. All have fallen short of the glory of God. All have a less than perfect relationship with their loving Father. Some wander off willfully--the obvious rebels, the drama queens. Others seething with resentment set themselves apart from God quietly and unobtrusively, playing by the rules while raging furnace-hot on the inside. God loves both. Which is to say, God loves all. God throws parties, God walks out on his God's own parties, God sends his own Son to teach this to us. God gives up his own Son for dead to demonstrate this once and for all in the strongest possible terms, crazier than the hyperbole of Jesus's parables is the scandal of the cross.

The point, as I see it, is that a church's mission can never be anything less than ministering to *all* people, because anything less dilutes the audacity of Jesus in his parables. Anything less blurs the scandal of Jesus on the cross.

We can't water down the Gospel without changing it into something it is not. We can't soften the hard edges of the Gospel into the pastel and cursive of a Hallmark card. In Jesus Christ God acted definitively, in real time, under harsh circumstances, to show us something that doesn't add up in our way of thinking but is true nonetheless.

The Gospel has hard edges, precise corners. Something that sounds reasonable to us, like, say, that phrase, "everything in moderation," is not the Good News. The Good News is God's *immoderate* love for all. And those who take this Good news to heart, and shape their lives around it, and join institutions dedicated to putting this Good News into practice, commit themselves to learning to love like this. Prodigally. Immoderately. Understanding that this love, and only this love, and nothing less than this kind of crazy insane God-love can save us.

My family and I were privileged to travel to Cuba last month for a vacation. My husband Carlos is Cuban, and under the current administration we are allowed to travel there. We enjoyed visiting a branch of the family who still lives there, and introducing our son Daniel to his Cuban heritage.

While in old Havana, Habana Vieja, we made a point of going to a restaurant called La Floridita, where Ernest Hemingway spent many a day during his decades living in Cuba. We didn't eat there--it was too expensive!--but we looked around and saw the marvelous, life-size statue of Ernest Hemingway positioned just exactly where he used to spend his time seated at the bar in a certain spot.

That experience found me thinking of the opening sentence of Hemingway's short story, "The Capital of the World." Introducing the main character, whose name is Paco, Hemingway writes:

Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is the diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal column of [the newspaper] which said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN, PAPA, and how a squadron of the [civil guard] had to be called out to disperse the 800 young men who answered the advertisement.²

Friends, Pacos, you may think you are all alone in the world in your private pain and loneliness, but for every one of you there are 800 more who share the broad brushstrokes of your story. For everyone of us, there are 800 more longing to hear, in their own Father's unmistakable voice, those simple words, "all is forgiven."

And there's that word "all" again! Our mission at Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green is ministering to *all* people, announcing in word and in deed that God loves extravagantly, recklessly (by human standards), and that this love is best seen in Jesus Christ, in whom *all* is forgiven.

And when we say "all", we mean "all." And we mean "all," *all of the time*.

To the glory of God. Amen.

~Ruth L. Boling, Pastor

¹Morley, Rick. "Nobody does this: a reflection on Luke 15:1-10," www.rickmorley.com/archives/2751, blog post Sept. 6, 2013.

²Hemingway, Ernest. The First Forty-Nine Stories, (1944: Alden Press, Oxford), p. 44