

Luke 15:1-7

The Face of Hope: God's Lost and Found

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The Congregational Church of Needham

When Susan approached me back in October to assist her in worship on one of the Communion Sundays Heike would be away, it took me about one second to say yes. Since making the decision long ago to live out my call to ministry as a pastoral psychotherapist, the part of ministry I have really missed is participating in worship. In case you are wondering what pastoral counseling is exactly, it is a unique combination of psychologist and minister. I help people with all sorts of concerns, including issues of faith and spirituality.

In saying yes to assisting in worship, I found my vestments and refreshed my memory in the details of liturgy. I felt very rusty... and yet I had a wonderful time that day reconnecting with a part of myself that had long been missing. Stray sheep: found. Perhaps you know something of this: finding a long lost part of yourself that you forgot was there, and the delight in rediscovering it. In my debrief with Susan after the service I offered to fill in on other Sundays until Heike returned, and that our family had few plans to be out of town between now and then. And so it happened that I became the pinch hitter Associate of sorts. Shepherd: Found. I was pleased to continue on assisting with worship and filling the gap. If there ever was a dream gig for someone with pastoral training, this was it! Parachuting in to the liturgical season of Advent....I felt blessed in the dual nature in this opportunity.

Sometime in November, Susan asked if I would like to preach this morning. It took me much longer than one second to answer *this* question. In fact, I thought about it long and hard. This isn't usually my gig but I decided that in the offer was an opportunity though I wasn't exactly sure what that opportunity was. Like the waiting of Advent, I knew that it was on me to wait for God and get quiet enough to listen for what God might want to say.

First the title came to me, like a thought bubble: The Faces of Hope. Hmm, I thought. Whose faces? Whose hope? My patients? The congregation's? The candidates for ministry that I assess for psychological fitness? I knew that there was something in there that would be relevant, that would hopefully inspire something in us gathered here this morning. That's as far as it went at the moment. So I thought, "Never mind. It will come. It will become clear."

As I was considering this moment, what first came to mind was what I have seen each Sunday as I have stood before you at the lectern. Whoever stands up here has the chance to look out and see your faces. I *see* you, and in your faces I recognize a common thread, which is that each of us comes to this church because it provides something we don't get any place else. It is a place where we are seen and where we are found. It is here, together and professing our faith that we can find hope, which has an amazing power to transform us. In this transformative hope, we come to know that God unfailingly sees us, and that we are beloved by God.

In this role over these past months, I have gotten a snapshot of the lives of many in this congregation, and what has been reconfirmed for me is what I see in my work as a pastoral psychotherapist: that life is a journey filled with twists and turns. Concerns and celebrations. Some of them we choose, and others we do not. In my pastoral prayers I have set about sowing seeds of hope because I know full well that there are struggles in our midst as well as celebrations. In my work with my clients I also work to sow seeds of hope. The seeds I sow, and that all of us can sow are simple, and they are this: I try to help people rediscover their inner hope when it is lost. I offer the hope that says you don't have to live your life reincarnating the hurts of the past so they accompany you each day. It is about seeing someone for who and where they are, and providing them as best we can the unconditional love that we find from God so that we can be a vehicle for the healing power of God's love. It is encouraging them along new paths, learning new ways of being so they can thrive and not just "survive." *That* is hope! It is instilling the belief that they can love God and let God love them. All this is what a beloved mentor, professor and friend long ago told a room full of aspiring clergy: that sometimes what people need most is not a God that is unseen, but a God with skin on. And that God with skin on is the shepherd who knows his sheep and comes after the one who is lost.

Over time, I have come to understand the idea of hope as opportunism at its best. Often, the word "opportunistic" is used negatively, but in this case, I think it is God's way of working for good. When people come to me seeking assistance with something, I think it is God at work. It is God prodding someone along who is in need of hope and help. Usually those who come are people who are struggling with a particular issue or problem, but often it is the case that the thing that brought them really is not the issue at all. It is something larger, and often like a boulder that is hard to move. Almost unfailingly there is an underlying question of meaning or purpose. Sometimes the question is more despairing and goes something like "What's the point?" Perhaps you recognize some moments in your own life that have gone something like this. I know I have. And I, like you, also know the power of Jesus' parable of the lost sheep from both sides of the equation. I am not unique. We can all have moments where we are either the sheep gone astray, or we are holding out our arms to catch the one gone astray. In the gesture of offering hope, we chip away at the boulder, so that it gets smaller and smaller. And as we chip away together, we get stronger and stronger so that we can either push the remaining rocks away or leap over them altogether. That is the act of transformation, and it's all powered by hope that you can do it, reinforced by finding out that, actually, yes! It can be done after all and it wasn't as bad as we thought it might be.

Psychotherapeutic clinicians are famous for case illustrations. It is a psychotherapist's version of a parable, of painting a picture to demonstrate and reinforce a principle. In this case, it is the principle that with hope all things are possible. The subtitle could be "When you are struggling it can be hard to think of hope as real." Let me tell you about someone who came to me for therapy several years ago. I got a call from a colleague and friend who was serving a church near my office. A parishioner of hers had suffered a terrible tragedy: her brother, father and uncle had died of carbon monoxide poisoning in a remote fishing cabin. This was an annual trip that she normally would have been on too, but that year she had relocated to this area and with her new job she had little vacation time so she couldn't join them as usual. The loss was overwhelming to this young woman who also happened to be a person of great faith. And yet in these losses her faith was shaken to the core. While she never lost her faith, her grief blinded her for a long period of time. Together, we chipped away at it, because as you can imagine, a sudden loss like that has many layers.

Underneath the grief were other layers of imperfect relationships that never had the chance again to be aired out and worked through in person. All the while of processing this loss, life continued of course, and she traversed many difficult times that included her partner leaving her (which led to a divorce), a cousin dying in a commercial plane crash, and leaving her career as a graphic designer to attend seminary. This sounds really unbearable, doesn't it? It *was*, and as Psalm 23 goes she felt it to be "the valley of the shadow of death." And yet she found her way to her minister, who sent her to me, and we set out on a journey of faith and healing together.

There comes a time in almost every therapy case when you are in a place, as this woman was, where the client wants to know "Will I ever get better? Will I ever feel happiness? Will I ever feel fill in the blank?" She asked this many times as she trudged forward in her path to healing and wellness. Week after week as we peeled back the layers of grief or unfinished business, I journeyed with her planting seeds of forgiveness, of comfort, of God's love, and of hope. One day, as her depression lifted, she wondered aloud to me, "Why do you do this work? Isn't it hard?" I said that sometimes it was hard, but that I could bear it and that I wasn't shouldering it alone. I also told her that I did and still do fervently believe in the power of God's love and of the heart's ability to heal. I told her that I felt God was grieving with her, but that neither God nor I would abandon her in this place and that I could never imagine that God would want her to suffer so greatly. I offered her hope that she could and would get through this and that there was much more for her to experience as she walked her days on this earth.

This client was one of the most courageous and admirable people I have ever had the privilege to work with. Little by little her grief lessened and her joy increased. She has gone on to live a life that is full of hope, knowing that she has travelled to the depths.....and survived. And become a full and vital human being. With God's help. Because she allowed herself to get the help she didn't know she needed. Because she wandered in to my office where I offered hospitality, sowed seeds of hope, journeyed with her to the depths and back, and helped her transform her life from one of complete grief and suffering to one of health and internal strength.

So back to the original question: what would I talk about? Actually, it turns out it is about

the face of hope, of God finding us when we are lost and loving us so unfailingly that we find our way to claim the hope and love God offers us and wants us to share with others. We all have seeds of hope in us and the surety we are God's beloved. In this new year, whether sheep or shepherd, what inspires you to claim and share the hope and love found in the One we all call God?