

September 11, 2022
Lectionary 24, Year C
The 14th Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 15:1-10
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Sought

Tuesday was my first day back from sabbatical. I used my key to unlock the empty church building. Then I walked through Kask Hall and the hallway and I unlocked my office, turned on the light, and sat down at my desk for the first time in three months.

It felt as normal as if the preceding three months hadn't happened. After I had spent some time in prayer and made a plan for the day, I booted up my computer and opened my internet browser so that I could get into my email box to start working through the hundreds of emails I was sure would be waiting for me.

I went to my email, and after three months, I had, unsurprisingly, been signed out. So, I entered my username, my email address, and then tabbed to the place where I was supposed to enter my password. I placed my fingers over home row on my keyboard, ready to type, and realized, I had forgotten my password for my email account.

I remembered a password from eight months ago, but I had no idea what my most recent password was for my church email. I was less than an hour into my first day back at work and already, my carefully crafted plans for how organized and on top of things and efficient I was going to be were overturned by the disappointing reality of life.

Things rarely go the way that we plan for them to go.

Of course, with a little bit of help it didn't take me too long to get my email password changed (and written down in a safe place) so that I could carry on with my day, but that little delay, that little frustration reminded me of what I should have already known. Things rarely go the way we expect them to, the way that we want them to, the way that we planned.

As you probably know, I didn't have the sabbatical that I was expecting to have. We ended up canceling our trip around the country and stayed much closer to home.

For many reasons that turned out to be a good thing. It was good to have time here, to focus on getting Abigail ready and off to college. We got to get Julia started on her college search. John got to be in Norwood High School's summer musical, Grease. Cyrus got to try out for and start playing with a club soccer team. Though my mother did a lion's share of the work, we were able to help her with emptying out her house and finalizing her move to Norwood. Britton got to go to South Carolina to spend time with his mother after she had surgery.

It was a good summer and good to be able to give my whole attention to these things, all of which took more attention and time than I had anticipated, rather than being pulled in yet another direction by the demands of work.

But, I'll admit, when we canceled our trip and realized that we'd need to spend the summer in Norwood, I thought that the silver lining of that were all of the projects that I would have time to do, things that I couldn't do, traveling cross country in a mini-van.

And I'll admit, a lot of those things, a lot of those projects still aren't done, because things almost always take longer than expected, because

energy levels wax and wane, because of the unexpected, the unplanned, the unforeseen, good and bad.

Going into the summer, I imagined that if I was just disciplined enough, wise enough with my time, if I was just focused enough, I could cram years of living, years of projects deferred, years of ideas never followed through on into three months.

I was wrong.

I did many good and worthwhile things during my sabbatical and I will be forever grateful for the time. But I couldn't do everything.

Which makes me wonder about the sinners and the tax collectors who had come to listen to Jesus. I wonder what their story was.

I mean, very few Jewish children growing up in those days probably thought, "When I grow up, I'm going to be a collaborator with the Romans and collect taxes for them."

They probably had different plans for their lives, and then things didn't go the way that they expected.

We don't know what kinds of people, what kinds of behaviors landed people with the label "sinner", but very few people probably thought, at the beginning of their lives that that was how they would end up; as sinners, on the outskirts of society, barely tolerated, if at all, earning the scorn of the leaders in their society, the Pharisees and the scribes.

But life had happened to them, they had been backed into corners by circumstances, they had made the wrong choices, life hadn't gone according to plan, there they were. Looked down on and trapped, probably seeing no way out of the situations that they found themselves in and with no respectable people who wanted to help them.

But then there was Jesus. It seems that when these folks showed up, these imperfect people, with their imperfect lives Jesus didn't tell them to go away, to get out before they contaminated the so-called good people with their sinfulness.

Jesus let them stay, gathered them around him, right there in his inner circle. His stories, his teachings, his presence was for them too, for the people who didn't have it all together, for the people for whom life wasn't going according to plan, for the people who were facing disappointments, failures, for the people who felt trapped.

And, of course, by associating with "those people" Jesus himself earned the scorn and censure of the fine upstanding people of this time, the religious leaders, those who were looked up to in their society. They said of him, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So, Jesus told them two parables, about seeking the lost.

The way he told them, he made it seem obvious, "Which of you wouldn't do this?"

Which of you wouldn't leave 99 sheep to seek after the one that is lost? What woman wouldn't put aside her day's tasks to find a lost coin, even if the finding of it meant that she hadn't been able to prepare a meal for her family or clean her home or go to the market to buy or sell for her family; even if the finding of it cost her more than it was worth?

Jesus asks the questions like the answer is, "Of course, any of us would do that."

But the real answer is, hardly anyone. Hardly anyone would do what Jesus described. Endanger the 99 to save the one. Set aside a day's plan to seek the lost, even if it was valuable.

That's part of what makes these parables interesting. Jesus presents them as though they were obvious, as though they were reasonable courses of action to take. But they're not.

So, instead of stating the obvious, Jesus is telling the Pharisees and scribes something extraordinary about God. And it's not that God doesn't love them. They are never excluded from God's family; they just need to know who's a part of it too.

Jesus is telling them that God does what is surprising, what is unreasonable, what is, perhaps, even unwise, to make sure that everyone is included, to make sure that not a single one is lost.

Friends, I must admit to a certain level of frustration about what I didn't do on my sabbatical, the projects still unfinished, some not even started, the plans made but not followed through on, the time wasted, the time given over to other things.

Somehow, I imagined that maybe I would be a different kind of person, living a different kind of life on sabbatical.

At just about the same time as I realized that I wasn't going to be able to finish all or even most of the projects that I had planned to do during my sabbatical, about the middle of August, one of my friends on Facebook posted this on her Facebook page:

All of my plans for the future involve me waking up tomorrow with a sudden sense of discipline and adherence to routine that I have never displayed even once in my life.

They weren't her original words, they were something that she had copied from another source, but they spoke to me. I realized that they had been my whole approach to sabbatical. That I had approached my sabbatical as if I needed to spend the time becoming a different kind of person, a better person, a more disciplined person. As it related to myself, I realized that I had let my inner pharisee loose; torturing myself with the question, why couldn't I be better, stronger, more organized, not the kind of person who collapsed into bed every night, at the end of another sabbath-less day, wondering why I couldn't have done more.

And then I came home. I came here, back to my church, to our church, back to this community of faith and I hear these words of grace.

Jesus seeks us, in all of the ways that we don't measure up to our own or society's expectations.

In all of the ways that we have disappointed and been disappointed, in all of the ways that we struggle Jesus seeks us; all of us who know that our plans just aren't cutting it and Jesus carries us home. Jesus celebrates us, for who we are, not for who we think we should be or who someone else thinks we should be.

We might want more, the pharisees around us and within us might expect more, might demand more, But Jesus seeks us and Jesus rejoices over us, and Jesus eats with us and feeds us, and friends, I needed to hear that. Thanks be to God. Amen.