

I Timothy 1: 12-17  
Ezekiel 34: 6-16  
Luke 15: 1-10

The Search  
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Speaking of Sunday School, and religious education in general (which I was doing earlier with the Children's Message) I often think of the ways we search to convey things that seem too big for words. Especially in our Protestant tradition, with its focus on **The Word** and **words**, we so often stumble around in a search for a new language, or a renovation of language. One of my Old Testament professors, William Holladay (who died earlier this year) once wrote: "It would not be too extreme to say that studying theology is learning how to say the least wrong thing about God." So maybe teaching Sunday School is searching to say the least wrong thing – whether it is through story or through action.

The Children's Message, or The Children's Sermon as it is sometimes called, give us a lot of room for both the search for meaning and an utter failure to communicate. One of the favorite tools ministers have is a prop to show the kids. We forget that not all six-year-olds make the intellectual leap from seeds in Dixie cups to the growth of the Kingdom of God. I found a list of classic opening lines for Children's Messages – thankfully none that I have used, though I am certain that I am as guilty as the next teacher. How about:

"Here's a bent spoon. Let's imagine the woman with a crooked back."

"I brought two slices of bread, peanut butter, and a knife, because today we're talking about sanctification."

"Look at this picture of a zebra because our Bible lesson is about who goes to heaven."

"Here's a walnut. Picture the Gospel in a nutshell."

"Here's a cell phone that reminds us of five things you need to know about prayer. Text messages, for instance."

"I brought my favorite Transformer, Devastator, because he reminds me of St. Paul."

"I brought a bag of fortune cookies because we're starting a sermon series on the prophets."

"This is a camera. Let's focus on justification."

"I brought a snake, but it's a rubber snake, or is it?"

So much for our search for the perfect image, or perfect explanation, or the least wrong thing to say. As I said earlier, we stumble around, maybe doing the best we can, with words and symbols. We stand in a long tradition of this activity. One of the object lessons that appealed to both Old Testament prophets and Jesus was that of Shepherd and Sheep. Maybe they brought actual shepherds and sheep into their circles of disciples... I don't know. But in their attempt to say something about God and humanity, this is what seemed to work for them.

I could tell you (as I have done in other sermons) about the ancient Hebrews and their use of the word "shepherd" for king and "sheep" for the people. I could tell you (as I have in other sermons) about the shepherds of Jesus' time, and how they took the sheep out to desolate, remote places for grazing. I could tell you (as I have done in other sermons) about a woman's ten silver coins, about how they were probably part of her bridal dowry and on her head covering. We could work on making sense out of all that, taking seriously the work of learning and instruction, so

proper for a church of reasonable, educated people. Then we could take the step of making all this relevant, and so justify the time we spend here. Then we could go home, confident that we have mastered our religion.

But we would be wrong, because at the center of our faith is a mystery in the form of affirmation. We experience glimpses of this as a revelation, through Jesus, that God is completely and utterly for us, and is endlessly searching for us. And so we limp through language and stories that might begin to express this mystery, though we will never be entirely successful. We imagine the desperate shepherd, listening for the bleating of one particular lamb. We imagine the frantic housewife, holding the lamp for the glimmer of that one particular coin. The Search...and then the reward, the rejoicing of the angels in heaven. But we have to admit that these are foreign, archaic images, for us.

Today, on September 11, I remember the events of 15 years ago, the tragedy that changed so much of our world. I remember the aftermath, when I saw images of 8.5 X 11 flyers. As one reporter described them: "Taped to lampposts, walls, store windows, gathered in great clusters on the sides of hospitals, they were a humble catalogue of the missing, on view for months, intense visual windows onto internal disruption and cosmic pain...."

The look and feel of these flyers was unnerving. They were hastily made from whatever information could be gathered: height, weight, eye and hair color, blood type, birth date, contact numbers. There were almost no e-mail addresses, which weren't universal yet. Nearly every one listed the floor the missing person worked on, and those numbers are still terrifying: The higher the number, the deeper the pit in one's stomach. Almost all bore pictures, mostly snapshots of family gatherings, group shots, girlfriends laughing together. Most so young."

This, then, might be the parable a teacher could use to express the poignant mystery of God's loving search for us, if we wanted to begin to fathom how urgent and deep that search is. I think of the first responders, running towards the catastrophe instead of away, in their determination to find survivors. Beyond all logic and earthly wisdom we are confronted with an experience of being found by that search. In the letter to Timothy, we heard an attempt to describe how it feels to be lost – as in "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence" – and then found – as in "I received mercy...the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with faith and love." There is a tone of *disbelief* here: even I, the worst of sinners, was found by love. And then the writer bursts into a song of praise, as though the holy mystery is too much: "To the king of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." This is not a reasoned lecture on theology. It is a testimony to mystery.

Now I want to say a word about sin and sinners – maybe to de-mystify those terms a bit. Sinners are the people who inspired Jesus parable (because some people didn't want them around), and a sinner wrote the letter to Timothy. The Greek word here means "miss-er": someone who missed the target, or missed the boat, or didn't quite get it. They need to get back on track, so to speak. In other words, it's everyone, at one time or another. And probably, it's everyone, over and over again. That condition of getting lost and then being found is part of our formation, our story of growth, of learning, of wisdom, of caring, of worship. So – repentance is our awareness of this. Repentance can evoke images of sorrow for hurting God, of turning away from wicked actions and returning to God. But biblical ideas of repentance are much richer than this. The Hebrew concept speaks of a return to God by those who have already known God as a loving parent – or shepherd. The word used in the New Testament suggests taking a second look, turning around, remembering

and renewing. Repentance is *not* taking on a new burden of sorrow and regret to offer as a gift to God, but the *joy* of being discovered and embraced by a searching God. A mysterious joy, that can hardly be taught, hardly be learned.

So, you might ask, why do we even try to teach children, or adults, anything about the Bible, or about spirituality, or about worship, or any of the vocabulary of faith? Why bother, if our words and actions are so feeble? St Paul wrote that we should think of ourselves as “servants of Jesus Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.” We take our place in a long line of servants and stewards, then, adding our experiences of sin and grace, of lostness and foundness, to the treasure store of testimony. And that treasure store becomes a resource, an arena where we might find common ground, a place where we learn how to be servants in the service of Christ. As stewards of God’s mysteries, we preserve a space, or tend a garden, where faith can take root.

I don’t want to give you the impression that openness to mystery means shutting down our brains completely. William Sloane Coffin said, “There is nothing anti-intellectual in the leap of faith, for faith is not believing without proof, but trusting without reservation. Faith is no substitute for thinking. On the contrary, it is what makes good thinking possible. It has what we might call a limbering effect on the mind; by taking us beyond familiar ground, faith ends up giving us that much more to think about.” So every Sunday, and often on the days in between, we stewards are called beyond familiar ground to places of spiritual and mental exploration. We will never get to wrap our religion up in a neat package, or curriculum, or sound bite, so you might as well give up that search right now. And that’s OK with me, because I am on a much more exciting quest. And I can’t think of any people who I’d rather have along with me, than you.

T.S Eliot said in his poem *Little Gidding*:

You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more  
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation  
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.  
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,  
They can tell you, being dead: the communication  
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.

I speak the language of the living while listening for echoes of fiery speech. Or, to use another mysterious metaphor, I see through a glass dimly. But in this community of sinners and searchers, I sometimes am privileged to take a second look, turn around, remember and find renewal. I get to repent. And then I am found all over again. The Searcher will not give up. Thanks be to God.