

## **Homily – Everyone and Everything Belongs**

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A New York Times travel article on pubs in Oxford commented that “a good pub is a ready-made party, a home away from home, a club anyone can join.” The TV series “Cheers” was one such pub. It was a place where one felt welcomed, known by name, and a sense of belonging. Whether it is for the first time or over and over, this is the type of place that we all want to walk into, someplace we belong. On the other hand, sometimes we walk into a place, and we know that we don't belong. Instead, we have lost our way. This is not a very good feeling, and I hope it's one that you don't have very often. May we all walk into places where we are welcomed. And, one can imagine the Jesus of today's Gospel reading sitting in such a pub, eating and drinking with anyone, to the chagrin of the proper and the pure. And I can assure you, that Jesus always made everyone feel like they belonged. No one felt lost when they were with Jesus. So, today I want to look at how we can help the lost be found and those feeling out of place have a sense of belonging.

One of the wonderful things about the parables or stories told by Jesus is that you can look at them from several vantage points. For example, the parable of the Prodigal Son is told by Luke immediately following today's Gospel reading, and in that story we can take the role of the father, or of the prodigal son, or of the older brother. Depending on the vantage point that you take you can have a very different lesson from the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Likewise, we can take several vantage points in today's Gospel reading about the sheep and coins. The most common vantage point is that we are the lost sheep or the lost coin, and from this perspective, today's story is a comforting message about hope and grace. In this way we have a story about God's unceasing love for us. We have Jesus reaching out to the tax collectors and the sinners, and since we are all sinners, we have a very comforting message in which the lost are found again.

And, we can also look at today's story from the vantage point of the person who owns or cares for the sheep and the coins. In this way we are called by Jesus to reach out to the lost sheep and find the lost coin. We are called to evangelize the Gospel and share the good news with those that haven't heard and experienced it. By the way, did you hear me say the “E” word – evangelize? This is a word that often makes us uncomfortable. We would rather be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. We would rather serve those in need and work for social justice. The more basic definition of evangelize makes is uncomfortable, but be at ease. This is not the disturbing message I want to share today.

Instead, I want to shift the vantage point of our stories again and look at it from the vantage point of the ninety-nine sheep and the nine coins. From this vantage point we are the ones who have not been lost. We are the ones who are already in church. We are the ones who are already saying our prayers. We are the ones who are already serving God. But, as the insider we may be getting some things terribly wrong. For you see, the story told in today's gospel reading is a direct response to criticism from the religious insiders surrounding Jesus that day. Their grumbling was provoked by the radical hospitality they were witnessing. This promiscuous meal shared by Jesus offended their sensibilities. After all they were the ones who were intimately acquainted with the rules, the ones who drew the boundaries, the ones who enforce the holiness codes of clean and unclean. Today's two parables are given to those religious insiders, just as they are given to us today. So, we should ask, what boundaries do we have in our community? Who do we let in, and who do we exclude? Are we even aware of what we're doing? When one is excluded from our community or one goes missing from our community, we are all affected. When one is restored, or welcomed in for the first time, we are all better for it. This is how it is in the household of God. This is how we want it to be here at St. Barnabas. We want to be known for our radical hospitality especially for those who are not yet here. So, what are we doing to help other know they belong?

Love and belonging are irreducible needs for all human beings. Other words related to belonging are acceptance, affinity, association, attachment, inclusion, kinship, loyalty, and rapport. And, in the absence of love and belonging, there is always suffering. We can't survive without one another. We are a social species. And, true belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are, it requires you to be who you are. Belonging is being somewhere where you want to be, and they want you. Conversely, fitting in is being somewhere where you want to be, but they don't care one way or the other. Belonging is being accepted for who you are. Fitting in is being accepted for being like everyone else. If I get to be me, I belong. If I have to be like you, I fit in. Jesus calls us to belong in a way that we bring our authentic, beautiful self, just the way we have been created. And in this way belonging to Jesus shapes our lives. Don't you want to be part of a community in which the ninety-nine sheep make sure the lost sheep feels that he or she belongs?

Now, there are a series of things we can do to create a community that welcomes all, a church where everyone and everything belongs. These steps are what we must do to prepare ourselves to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus. As followers of Jesus we know that Christ is in all and around all. In this way Christ connects all. Why then are humans so prone to excluding and separating? Why do we spend so much time

deciding who does not belong in our religious, political, and personal worlds? How can we get everything to belong in our own heads and hearts? And, this is not just work for those people over there. It is inner work, not outer work, inner work and change for us here at St. Barnabas.

So, let's first understand this: Humans have a deep and legitimate need for an identity inside of this huge cosmos. To develop a healthy ego, we must differentiate and individuate; we must know we're special and find a place where we are loved and where we belong without needing to prove ourselves. This is our launch pad to become a community and people where everyone and everything belongs. American philosopher Ken Wilber suggests that religion has two very important and different functions to support human development. First, religion creates meaning for the separate self. It offers myths and rituals that help us make sense of and endure what Shakespeare would call "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." You need to first feel special and chosen to launch beyond yourself. This feels like a paradox, but it really isn't. It is the nature of all growth.

The second and mature function of religion is to help individuals transcend that very self. Great religion seeks full awareness and expanded consciousness (often called "holiness") so that we can, in fact, both give and receive in equal measure. This second function and goal of religion, Wilber says, "does not fortify the separate self, but utterly shatters it." Mature spirituality offers "not consolation but devastation, not entrenchment but emptiness, not complacency but explosion, not comfort but revolution." Rather than bolster our habitual patterns of thinking, mature religion radically transforms our consciousness and gives us what the Apostle Paul calls "the mind of Christ"

With this mind of Christ, we recognize that God is another word for everything. God created everything and is in sympathetic union with everything God created. St. Bonaventure of the thirteenth century said that his entire life's theology could be summed up in three sacred ideas: First, we come forth from God bearing the divine image, and thus our DNA is always grounded in the life of God. Second, everything in creation is an example, manifestation, and illustration of God in time and space. And finally, all returns to the Source from which it came. The Omega is the same as the Alpha and this is God's supreme and final victory.

And when we lean into this final victory then we live and see through God's eyes. When God looks at us, God can only see "Christ" in us. Yet it's hard—for us!—to be naked and vulnerable and allow ourselves to be seen so deeply. It is hard to simply receive God's loving and all-accepting gaze. We feel unworthy and ashamed. The very essence of all faith is to trust the gaze and then complete the circuit of mutual friendship. As Meister Eckhart says, "The eye with which I see God is the same one

with which God sees me. My eye and God's eye is one eye, and one sight, and one knowledge, and one love."

All of this is a tall order and the work of a lifetime. However, I am convinced that the only way to accept that everyone belongs, is to accept that everything belongs. So,

Build a healthy sense of self.

Let go of that self and let it die.

Know that God is in all and around all.

See the way that God sees.

And, as we grow in wisdom, we realize that everything belongs and everything can be received. Spirituality is about seeing—seeing things in their wholeness, which can only be done through the lens of our own wholeness. That is the key! It's about taking responsibility for our way of relating to things rather than aiming for any kind of perfect results or necessary requirements. Once you see skillfully, the rest follows. You don't need to push the river, because you are already in it. The One Life is living itself within us, and we learn how to say yes to that one shared life, which includes both the good and the bad sides of everything. This Divine Life is so large, deep, and spacious that it even includes its seeming opposite, death. This one, great life does not end, it merely changes. This is true in the entire physical world, and Jesus tells us it is true as well in the spiritual world. This type of wisdom says, my life is not about me; it is about God, and God is about love.

God is like the shepherd who values each sheep in the flock, like the woman who accounts for every silver coin in the purse. God treasures every child of the family. When one goes missing, God goes into search mode. God's nature is love, and love looks like one who goes out tirelessly searching, because the one who was lost is so lost that she cannot find her way back home. May we work on our own wholeness so that can then share Christ's love in the world. In this way the lost may be found and those out of place feel they belong again.

And, as it says in the theme song for the TV show Cheers, "Sometimes you want to go Where everybody knows your name. And they're always glad you came. You want to be where you can see. Our troubles are all the same. You want to be where everybody knows your name.