

Lost and Found

Jamaica Plain, September 8, 2002, Rev. Terry Burke

My friend Stella got lost in the woods last month, during the terrible hot spell. You may remember her daughter Martha Penzer who preached to us last fall. Stella is a delightful woman in her 80's who folk dances regularly. She was staying at the Rhode Island home of her younger daughter, taking care of pets while the family was on vacation.

On a sweltering August day, Martha arrived at the Rhode Island home to have lunch with her mother; it was the 60th anniversary of the Nazi action that led to the deaths of Stella's family in the Holocaust. When Martha arrived, it was immediately obvious that something was very wrong. Her mother's car was in the driveway, but she was nowhere to be found. The dog was sitting outside in the shade.

Eventually, a small army of law enforcement and rescue personnel was looking for Stella, including dogs that has been used in the World Trade Center. That evening she still hadn't been found. The next morning the search resumed, and around noon, Stella was found in dense brush. Her daughter's dog had escaped into the woods while being taken for a walk, and before looking for the canine Stella had brought a cordless phone with her, in case she got lost. Unfortunately, the phone was soon out of range. When found, she declined a helicopter lift and walked out with the rescuers, with no ill effects.

Today, we begin a new year in the church, and many wonderful things are going on in our congregation. Yet many people, and our nation seem to be lost in the woods a year after September 11th. Some are afraid and anxious what will happen next, and are concerned about jobs and the economy. Our nation struggles with issues of civil liberties and security, and lurches toward a war with Iraq that our top military leaders don't want.

In today's first reading, Matthew writes about the ministry of reconciliation within the church community. First, one is to bring the issues to the estranged individual in private.

Then, if necessary, two or three members go to talk over the problem. If unsuccessful, the issue is brought to the whole church. If that doesn't work, the person is to become "as a Gentile or tax collector," outside of the community. However, remember that Matthew had been a tax collector in his former life. Then Peter, as leader of the Jesus' followers, asks how many times he has to forgive? The answer, depending on the translation is 77 times or 7 times 70 times, an even higher standard for church leadership to seek reconciliation.

In our second lesson, Garret Keizer, while serving a tiny congregation in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, organizes a lecture series on mysticism and Merton. While some of the "religious" people in town, from the fundamentalist church, dismiss the talks as "entertaining," a business leader and young farmer deeply appreciate them. Keizer comments how little we truly know our neighbors. Surely to notice and know our neighbors is a mystical practice. As monk Thomas Merton said in the middle of downtown Louisville, with people walking around him shining like the sun, "Thank God, thank God I am human being like others." Thank God I am a human being like others.

For the first Sunday of the new church year we have a rite of doing a Buddhist style walking meditation through the church. Silently and mindfully we walk in a circle through the sanctuary and the parish hall (where next week many of our religious education classes will be meeting) out onto the street and then back through the front door into the sanctuary. I invite you to walk with me, if you are willing and able.

As we walk in silence together, may we be mindful of our neighbors we walk with. May we also be mindful of the people of our community who have walked with faith and hope in the past. In our former church building on this site, people supported the American Revolution. In this building, families sent sons to fight in the Civil War. In these buildings neighbors survived the Great Depression together and consoled one another after the attack on Pearl Harbor. They attended weddings and commitment ceremonies and memorial services and study groups and potlucks and square dances and fellowship

dinners. As we walk together, may we be mindful of our neighbors – those who walk beside us, those of the past, and those of future generations. We need each other to find the way of reconciliation and forgiveness and healing.

Together may we embody God's love and justice, to show the way of hope to ourselves and our nation, to help the lost be found.

Readings

Matthew 18

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and what ever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive: As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Garret Keizer: A Dresser of Sycamore Trees

My reasons for wanting a lecture series on Christian mysticism in Island Pond , Vermont, aside from my own interest in the subject, were several. First, I was impelled by a little of the chutzpah that possesses most people who undertake "cultural "projects in depressed

or rural areas: I was throwing down the gauntlet to those who would say, "Christian mysticism in Island Pond, it will never fly."... Granted that Christians are not sole possessors of the truth, let us be clear about the truths they do possess...

Even I was amazed at the number and variety of those who came... There were two men from the (fundamentalist) Community Church.. One of them told me later, rather superciliously, that he'd found the lecture "entertaining." ..

There was also one of Island Pond's wealthiest and most prominent citizens. It turned out he had read every book by Merton in print. I had several times shaken his hand at well-attended funerals and civic functions, never guessing that this gregarious businessperson and I shared such an interest. A young farmer from Quebec had also come to hear the talk. Later during the question and answer period he spoke of his wish to find parallels for the strange "awareness" he had sometimes experienced while riding his tractor. As with the businessman above, I wondered how many people had driven by that farmer's field in summer, never guessing that the man on his tractor was tending hay in the midst of the Cloud of Unknowing. How little we see of our neighbors- and that, for me, is as "mystical" a realization as any. We are like tourists in Bethlehem, remarking that we might be better able to appreciate the spectacular star if it wasn't for some brat hollering in a stable.