

Back in the summer of 2016, I was wondering around the building of my first call doing my best impersonation of Bette Midler in *Hocus Pocus* singing out in summons of her beloved spell book which had gone missing. Now granted I wasn't trying to summon my spell book, but I *was* trying to summon a book back into my possession, a very specific book. My hymnal to be exact. To be sure, my hymnal is just like any other hymnal sitting in front of you in the pews, however, it is also unique.

This hymnal was given to me by my home pastor when I led my first service there as a seminarian. So it bears the label inside of our church's name and logo, and a dedication to a beloved member. In the back, there is a baby picture of Felix holding Kristin's finger, a note from my mom, and any number of quotes, lyrics, and verses that have moved me at different points in my ministry. Within its pages are bulletins from that first service at home, my last service at my internship congregation, a Valentine from my organist in Pittsburgh's son, and countless pieces of paper containing chapel hymns written down for me by Linda. There is no way to find this hymnal and not know that it is indelibly mine.

So rewind back to that 2016 summer. I had led worship on a Sunday morning and then immediately left for a mini-vacation down to Disney. When I returned and was preparing for worship the next Sunday I realized, I

did not have my hymnal. It wasn't where I usually kept it, it wasn't in the sanctuary, it wasn't anywhere in my office, in my car, in my bag, it had seemingly disappeared over the span of my vacation. There was part of me that had feared it had been taken, a weird sign of angst from someone since I had just announced the week prior that I would be leaving that congregation. I hunted and hunted through out whole building. I enlisted members of the staff, members of the congregation to keep their eyes peeled for it. Members searched pews, under cushions, everywhere, and it was nowhere to be found. I went so far to post on Facebook and to walk the building saying a prayer to St. Anthony the patron saint of lost things. There was nothing to be done. It was completely and totally lost.

It took almost a month. One day I walked into my office and there on my desk it was. I was flabbergasted, frantically flipping through it to confirm that it was in fact *my* hymnal and not some facsimile of what I wanted it to be. One of my folks came into my office and told me that she and another woman decided they were going to do one more thorough look through the pews. They searched the racks and *then* proceeded to pull everything out of the shelves that were under the pews where Bibles were kept. There, behind a couple of Bibles was my hymnal. I to this day have no idea how it got there, but the fact that I found it three weeks before my

last Sunday felt like a smidge of a sign from the Holy Spirit that it was going to be ok. From that moment on, these parables we hear from Jesus today have always hit a little bit harder, because that day in my office, I felt like I was rejoicing with heaven and earth at the conclusion of my own parable, the parable of the lost hymnal.

Our setup today is a familiar chorus from the gospels. Jesus is out and about in Galilee doing his Jesus thing and in the process has ticked off the Pharisees and scribes. This time around their grievance is with whom Jesus chooses to share meals, and so they hover around the margins of the crowds grumbling, probably not so under their breath, about Jesus' propensity to not only welcome sinners but *eat* with them. This is just a step too far for the religious elites. It's one thing to like acknowledge people who are sinful and unclean and "not worthy" of attention, it's a whole other things to share a table with them, become unclean yourself by rubbing elbows and sharing food with them. That's a sign of *acceptance* and hospitality and heaven forbid *love* for sinners and that's just too much.

Jesus catches wind of this grumbling and does what Jesus does best, he tells some pointed parables to come at this from his own angle. We have two stories of lost things, one slightly more incredulous than the other. The first of which finds Jesus asking the crowds who would have been very well

versed in the way of shepherds about the likelihood that a shepherd with a flock of 100 sheep going off in search of one that has wandered away leaving the 99 to fend for themselves until he finds the lost one. To the crowds this would sound *ridiculous!* Sheep are valuable but come on, you'd run the risk of 99 others for the sake of one?! But then Jesus pushes it a bit and says, this is how God feels about one sinner who repents. When that one is found, there is boundless joy.

So to get his point better across, Jesus raises the stakes. A woman has ten silver coins, no small amount of money for a woman in 1st century Galilee. When one of the ten goes missing, she searches high and low through her house until she finds that coin, which could be the difference between the amount of food she has for the coming weeks. This is a more understandable mode of desperate search for the lost thing. Sheep are sheep but money is money. But again Jesus emphasizes, the feeling when the coin is found is how God feels over the sinner who repents.

Yet, there's one other piece of these parables that is easy to miss, but needs emphasis. When the shepherd and the woman find their lost sheep and coin, respectively, they don't just celebrate in isolation. They invite their friends and their neighbors from all around to celebrate with them in the lost that was found. The finding of the lost calls for celebration on a

mass scale, not just on an individual one. Likewise, Jesus doesn't just say that *God* rejoices, but that all of heaven, God *and* God's angels both rejoice at the return of the lost. The finding of the lost is a call for communal joy, communal celebration, because when the lost are found it brings them back into community, it restores that community to wholeness and makes it better for their presence. That is something that is deserving of a large scale celebration, not just a quiet acknowledgment. Jesus wants to emphasize to the scribes and Pharisees that they should be rejoicing *with* him, sharing *with* him in these meals because those who were once lost have been found and have reentered the community of the kingdom of God. Jesus needs them to see that without those who had been lost, God's kingdom is not whole.

I think we, like the scribes and Pharisees, tend to miss this vital point. We don't see the return of someone, the repentance of someone as a benefit to *us*, to *community*, to the kingdom of God as a whole. We still tend to look at them with a side-eye and question their motives or wonder why now? We doubt their return and we wonder how long it is going to last and we certainly don't go out and actively look for them before they come back either. There is no ceaseless joy in those who we brand sinners making their way to God or finding reconciliation with God, because even if God is good

with them, well we still take issue, and if *we* take issue well then clearly that is the most important thing here.

But...I want you to think about what happens here every Sunday morning when we gather. What is the first thing that we do as a gathered community. We sit in silence and then confess *together* the repentance of our sins. We communally, wholly, as one people of God hear the words of forgiveness and let the peace, the comfort, the hope of that moment wash over us. What happens then, yes, impacts us individually, but it also impacts us *communally*, it is all of us declaring that in some way, shape, or form we have been lost and in that moment God found us and restored us to community and we are better for the presence of one another. So we have this deep moment of repentance and finding to start worship, and then how do we close worship?

We gather around this table together to receive the love, the grace, the gift of God. We are a gathered family of sinners around God's table where we are welcomed exactly as we are, and again, while those moments at the rail are deeply personal, they are also moments of massive communal celebration. We should rejoice that not only are we present in that moment but all of our siblings of Christ are. All of us are kneeling around this table with open hands and open hearts recognizing that while we have sinned,

while we are broken, God has found us, forgiven us, and made us whole and that is a gift to be celebrated by all of us, together.

Have you ever thought about that? Rejoicing in the presence of your siblings at the table? Rejoicing that they are kneeling with the assurance of God's forgiveness just as you are? So much of what we do is communal and yet so much of the time we can't see past our own noses and get out of our own heads to see it as anything but individual, and that's not even taking into account that sometimes we don't always want to see our community as our community, our family of God as our family because we harbor within us our own prejudices, grudges, and fears about who we gather together with. But at the end of the day, despite our differences, one thing binds us together, we have all been lost at some point, maybe right in this very moment, and God has scoured the countryside and overturned every cushion and searched every pew for us to bring us home. We aren't always the best at acknowledging that we have been lost, because it is a deeply vulnerable thing to admit, to admit to wandering, to losing our way, to not being certain, yet, maybe more than anything today we can rejoice that we have been found, we have been found and we have been brought home, here to this place where all our friends and neighbors greet us with resounding joy that we are here, that we are whole, that we are together. **AMEN!!!**