

Found Missing

Luke 15:1-7

First Trinitarian Congregational Church UCC

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I may have told you the story that the Rev. Chuck Hammond once shared with a bunch of pastors. Chuck was the equivalent of a conference minister in the Presbyterian world. Anyway, when he was first out of seminary he received a call to a church in a small town. Young and single, he was excited to be starting his career finally.

Chuck didn't much like to cook, and he discovered the local pool hall made some pretty good food – cheap. So, two or three nights a week he walked down to the pool hall and ordered himself dinner.

Mostly the characters who also hung out there were not the church-going type. There was a lot of smoking and drinking and tough talk – all in all it was a kind of rough, unkempt and questionable establishment.

People began to talk. It was, after all, a small town.

One Sunday, the lead layperson in the church asked Chuck if he might have a quick word with him after church.

“Of course,” said Chuck – ever the exuberant guy.

Once most of the congregation had left, the two of them sat in Chuck's office. The deacon said, “You know, people are starting to talk.”

Chuck had no idea what he was talking about.

“About the pool hall. I hear you're hanging out there 2 or 3 nights a week. It doesn't look good.”

“Oh, not to worry,” said Chuck. “I discovered they make some pretty good grub and it's cheap. That's all it is.”

“That may be so,” said the Deacon. “But it doesn't look good for our pastor to be hanging around a pool hall all the time. It's not exactly the image we want

to project.”

Chuck pleasantly reminded the Deacon about the unsavory characters Jesus hung out with.

The Deacon was quiet for a moment. Finally, when he was sure he had Chuck's full attention, he said, “Chuck, you're not Jesus.”

And thus we come to the heart of the tension in this parable. However ill-advised Chuck's choice of dinner establishment may have been, he was quite right about the fact that the people whom Jesus was accused of entertaining were likely to have been even more socially – shall we say – unacceptable than was the pool hall population.

Once accused of inappropriate boundaries, Jesus, told three parables. The parable of the lost sheep; the parable of the lost coin; and the parable of the prodigal son.

I decided to read only the parable of the lost sheep this morning.

You may or may not have noticed that the people playing the role of God in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin were a shepherd and a woman, respectively. People who enjoyed precious little social status.

I'm sure you noticed that the only actor in the parable was God – the lost sheep was about as helpless as a lost coin. God was the one doing all the seeking. And when the sheep was found at last, there was a great celebration. Indeed, just to make sure we don't miss the point, Jesus said there was more joy in heaven over that one sheep than there was in all the others who never left the fold.

Clearly, according to Jesus, God is extending an invitation to us to be on the search committee – to be on the lookout for those who have lost their way and

to celebrate those who have been found again.

Religion has been in the news a lot this week as we made our way to the 9th anniversary of 9-11. The Rev. Terry Jones, pastor of a small congregation in Florida, decided that God wanted them to burn some copies of the Koran to highlight the fact that Islam is NOT the right path in general, and to protest the proposed Mosque near ground zero in particular.

Incendiary is the word that comes to mind. To be sure, Mr. Jones is exercising his right to free speech, which right we will defend regardless of how much we disagree with the speaker. But the result of his exercise of free speech were large protests in Kabul, Afghanistan and Jakarta, Indonesia. The Muslim community around the world has been outraged.

It's a bit hard for us to understand it completely because the Bible is not held with the same kind of esteem. But I remember well the outrage of another era when a symbolic act involving fire and flags utterly infuriated Americans. While I wasn't into burning flags, the anger wasn't lost on me.

For me, there's a cruel irony that a Christian church, or a Christian minister, to be more specific, believes that the *love* of God is instructing him to be *hateful* to others. The juxtaposition is stunning.

Muslims in this country have good reason to be afraid. We have all too many hateful nut-cases running around who are pretty sure that to be Muslim is to be a terrorist.

That makes about as much sense as proclaiming that all Christians are members of the Ku Klux Klan. After all, the Ku Klux Klan members were all Christian. To equate all of Christianity with the KKK (or even with the Rev. Terry Jones) makes about as much sense as equating all of Islam with the terrorists.

Even if Islam proves to be more vulnerable to violent manipulation than other world religions (and I'm not at all certain that's the case), but even if that were true, God invites me to a life of love and celebration, not to a life that disrespects and demeans others.

Quite frankly, I am less concerned that the people of Islam are lost than I am with my own lostness – and the lostness of my own brother in Christ, the Rev. Terry Jones, whose wrong-headed, wrong-hearted understanding of the Gospel is embarrassing. And I remind myself that all too often I find myself wrong-headed and wrong-hearted.

But, there is good news. God always comes looking for me. Inviting me back to a place of loving kindness.

In our age, it is one thing to worry about our kids (or our ministers) hanging out with the wrong sorts of people; but it is a far more worrisome thing to discover we let ourselves get caught in hateful rantings and ravings that pass themselves off as faithfulness.

I would point out that an instructive verse from Galatians: the fruits of the Spirit are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Gal 5:22).

If we would not like our faith to be lumped with that of the Rev. Jones, we need to be watchful about lumping the faith of Muslims with that of the terrorists.

The fact that I have been found wanting more times than I would care to admit keeps me working and praying and repenting. But God's joy in finding me – over and over again – is what makes me smile and embrace the day.