

Sermon: Postmodern Grief, or, How Lost do we have to Be before God finds us?  
September 16, 2007  
Luke 15: 1- 10  
Rev. John G. Smith

.....

How many of you remember Gilligan's Island? I used to watch it every day after school when I was young. Ginger, the movie star, was my favourite character. I loved her! The show ran for 3 and a half seasons, ending in 1967, during which time the little group of 7 castaways, who had gone off for a simple 3-hour tour, never did leave the island or get rescued

It makes you wonder: How lost do you have to be, before they stop looking? In God terms, how lost do you have to be before God gives up? According to Jesus, God will not ever give up the search for us.

However, that was a statement that was easier to make before the events of September 11, 2001. After 9/11, everything has changed. Not a single aspect of our lives, of our existence, and even our faith, has avoided intense scrutiny. We have come to accept that we need more safety and security, We have come to see that sometimes violence must be ended with violence, though in our hearts we disagree with the escalation of violence. We have heard the name of God invoked on different sides of the ideological, theological, and sociological templates of our time. Good and evil are not fuzzy concepts we can avoid anymore; They seem to be etched across our lives in much starker relief. Faith is fragile, as it is bound to be when under close scrutiny! Since 911, it feels like everything has changed forever. We have lost control of our lives, so to speak, of the systems that influence us, of the empires and principalities that rule over us.

These sobering thoughts have robbed us of one very precious commodity: JOY And if I have any grief about the state of our modern, postmodern culture and lifestyle, it is that we have lost some of our capacity for joy. For celebration, for laughter, for fun. One of the goals David and I have for you here at Leaside is to have some fun together, to enjoy each other as traveling companions.

In our parables today, something of *real value* has been lost. To the shepherd it is one of his sheep, one of the flock, perhaps worth to him a month's wages if lost. To the woman, a coin (worth about a dime in our day), so we realize she was poor, destitute even, trying to get by when every penny counted. That lost coin represented for her perhaps a week's worth of food.

These parables are not just cute images for God. They draw us in, they make us wonder: does God really care about the poor? Does God really care that much about each individual? Is God really still involved in a seek and find mission? Or has God given up on the human project? In our post-modern world, we have become so cynical that perhaps our answers would be: No, no perhaps God doesn't care that much.

Or even: you are asking the wrong question: I don't even know if there IS a God!  
We can so easily scoff at the everyday nature of these stories and say, Why get so bothered about a sheep, it's only 1% of the flock? And why worry about one little coin? It's only a dime, and some people these days won't even waste the energy to pick up a dropped dime.

What is postmodernism? It is a general philosophy towards life, it is a way of understanding ourselves in this day and time and place, as compared to other times and cultures. It largely refers to a type of disillusionment, based on the complexity of a number of different things: we are individualistic, yet we crave community; we are diverse, and we celebrate diversity, yet we congregate like with like; we embrace ambiguity and yet we crave answers to our big questions. We embrace the rights of freedom of expression for example, but we want to draw lines around it, for example, regarding pornography.

In short, postmodernism means we have LOST the sense of the "it" that binds us together. In spiritual terms, we would say we have LOST the NARRATIVE that we share, the STORY that tells us who we are, why we are here, and where we are going. Is there anymore, a story that connects all the people of the earth? A story that inspires hope and unity and love?

**We have LOST the story's end!!!**

The story that, like Gilligan's Island, would have seen us home.

How easy to lose the joy of living when we contemplate these things!!!

So this is the situation we face these days. It seems to be the end of an era, the end of a worldview, yet we are searching and seeking for the new one to appear. What started out as a simple three hour tour, has now morphed into something much larger and bigger, with no real end in sight. We wish we hadn't started out, but, we already are marooned on the deserted island.

Somehow we know in our collective consciousness, that things will never be the same again!

Do you think this is true for churches as well?

Are we lost in the postmodern fog?

Has dense smoke engulfed us, such that we can't see clearly who we are or where we are going?

**Have we LOST the story that gets us home????**

Many of our churches are built in the same design: we are an upside down ship. We are a boat, you can see the wooden beams of the boat's underside, just above you. We call this the "nave", and you who sit here are part of the "navigation" team, or for short, the navy.

We have set sail on a journey of faith, and having hauled in the ropes that kept us tied to dock, we have unmoored ourselves from all that was, and set sail into a sea that is

dangerous, thrilling, and exciting. We have always, in the past, known who the captain of the boat was. We have always known where we were headed. We have always even been able to predict who would be on the boat with us.

But in a postmodern world, none of those certainties remain.

You might say we are up a creek without a paddle.

Jesus promised us that all seekers will find, and that all who are lost, will be rescued. What he didn't tell us, was how perilous the journey of faith would be, especially in our day!

Pi was a young man in India, growing up in a strict Hindu family. But as he matured, he embraced a little bit of Christianity, he prayed to the Buddha, and he studied Sufi mysticism. He seemed to live in a world of swirling religions, yet, rather than sample them all and reject them all, he assimilated them somehow into his worldview. He became a many-layered spiritual young man, much to the consternation of his family.

Pi took off on a trip on a huge ocean barge, that happened to be transporting zoo animals across the Indian ocean to Australia. In a typhoon, the boat took on too much water, it capsized and sunk. Pi found himself in a lifeboat with some very strange traveling companions: a hyena, a zebra, and a tiger.

The hyena eats the zebra, which is weak and vulnerable, having been hurt.  
The hyena then becomes dinner for the tiger.  
Then, an uneasy balance is established between the tiger and Pi.  
The journey becomes a test of fear, willpower, persistence and endurance,  
all without a shred of hope, mostly an overwhelming sense of despair.

Pi's fate, and that of the tiger, are inextricably linked.  
In actuality, he is "saved" only by his caring for the tiger.

The little lifeboat gets pushed about the Pacific ocean by currents and winds.  
Without a paddle, rudder, or anchor, Pi is quite helpless.  
He learns to scoop fish from the sea.  
He learns to filter salt water so that he can drink.  
He learns to survive somehow.

Do you remember how long he was on the little boat, before hitting landfall?  
It was 227 days.

Finally, when Pi had given up all hope, when his body was completely sunburned and parched, when even the tiger was ready to give in, they made landfall.  
Then after arriving and the sheer joy of finding the shore,  
and only then, could PI look back on the journey.

He COULD have maintained his hopelessness. He could have adopted the skepticism and cynicism of his new land, yet he chose to believe in beauty, in unity and in love. He chose to tell the story as if God had led him through this journey to a shore he could not imagine.

He chose to believe that God had brought him home.

This my friends, is one of the most NON-Postmodern things a person could say!

For us, let us say this: the church today is facing unimagined skepticism and cynicism. We who are Christians are suspect for our beliefs. Anyone of us could catalog the difficulties we will have as we keep sailing our little boat through the uncharted waters of our time.

But I prefer to believe in the beautiful, the life-giving, the good, and the uplifting. I prefer to think that God sees our boats, and holds them up with those everlasting arms, even as the sea held up Pi's little lifeboat.

I prefer to think that part of our journey will be assimilating some of the faith traditions of our friends, brothers and sisters of other faiths, taking them on board, rather than tossing them overboard. (the flock will be united)

I prefer to think that in the midst of rampant individualism, we will throw parties on our boat. Parties that celebrate the finding of the lost.

Parties that celebrate the simple joy of living.

In our personal lives, in our family lives, in our work lives, and in our church lives, we will look for answers to the questions that keep us awake at night.

We will be lost sometimes.

We will not always have answers that fit, even as we must learn new answers to old questions.

But we will offer love. We will offer strange traveling companions. But love will be our signature gift, still, as it always has been, so it always will be.

After all, aren't we the "loveboat?"

Let's all find ourselves a common anchor, something to ground us and keep us in unity and hope, not only as a church congregation, but as people of the world. Let's find a dream big enough to embrace all cultures and living things on the planet. Let's find a story that ends the same way it begins, with a loving Creator.

God's love is eternal. God's love reaches across the span of eternity. God's hand reaches out for us just as we think we are the little sheep who has strayed too far from the flock and is about to fall over the cliff. And God's love provides unity, reuniting *all* people into one tribe, into one body, one flock. And God knows our poverty of spirit, our lost hearts, our hurting souls. And sweeps the house until we're found. And in finding us, releases us to a new, unimagined life, life on a new and distant shore.

That's going to be our journey. May it be so!!!