

“Lost and Found:

A Sermon on Love and Belonging for Rally Sunday”

September 15, 2019

First Parish in Lincoln

Rev. Jenny M. Rankin

Readings: Luke 15:1-10, Frederick Buechner

“What I mean, writes Buechner.

Is that if we come to a church **right**,

We come to it

More fully and nakedly ourselves

Come with more of our **humanness** showing

Than we are apt to come to most places.

We come With muck on our shoes

Footsore and travel-stained with the dust of our lives upon us,

Our failures, our deceits, our hypocrisies. . . .

We come here as we are....

As strangers and exiles in our way

Because wherever it is that we truly belong

Whatever it is that is truly home for us

We know in our hearts

That we have somehow lost it and gotten lost.

Something is missing from our lives that we cannot even name—

Something we know best
 From the empty places inside us all
 Where it belongs.”

■ Frederick Buechner

It’s good to be back!
 I’m remembering last year and how I was just meeting you for the first time
 That was fun—a little nervous-making, truth be told
 This year I venture to say I feel more at home—
 Sure, I think the way time is measured here in Lincoln (don’t you have to be here
 about 8 generations for it to count?)--
 I’ve been here about a nano second but I feel like I know you a little bit more
 I’m so glad you are here this morning
 And that I’m here with you,
 Walking together
 In collaboration and partnership.

 It’s been a big week—things starting up with a bang--
 But I started this week
 In a field with a dog
 In the sunshine,
 Thinking about all of you.
 It was Monday morning
 The sky blue and the sun warm on my face as I walked my dog Finn
 In a meadow near the community garden close to home.
 The sun flowers towered over me and tomatoes were hanging heavy on the vine.

Rounding a corner of the meadow, Finn encountered another dog
 Bigger and shaggier than him to be sure, but both of them golden retrievers
 They meet at the corner of the field
 Sunlight shining down
 Two golden creatures
 Wagging tails
 Simple morning delight
 I let that moment ground me
 As I thought about you, this spiritual community
 And the week ahead
 My mind spinning and whirling with all that September brings
 The wonderful surge of energy as the church year starts again

So we're back and it's been a big week.

Lots of meetings—with our new staff team (5 of us!), we're so glad to have Sarah and Meredith with us, the new insights, creativity and experience they bring--

Meeting with the deacons, the transition team, FPL Green for a rich conversation on climate change, meeting with some of you as you focus on how to be more welcoming and how to invite people to volunteer (fill out the yellow sheet!)

Slipping into the quiet of the meditation circle on Tuesday afternoon

Listening to some of you speak, about summers that have been rich and varied or summers that held pain and loss

I walked through the days of the week—listening to you--

Thinking about this community

And as I walked, the words “lost and found” stayed with me

And the words “love and belonging” echoed like a drumbeat through my days.

.....

So first, Love and belonging.

I told you I started Monday morning in a field in the sunshine but it was later that day when I was out walking again, this time with a friend who teaches school—she was telling me about her first day back and how all the classes in her independent school were starting with Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs

“Interesting” I said though truth be told I couldn’t really remember what it was!

She filled me in. Maslow’s hierarchy is often drawn as a triangle

With a broad base and different colored layers on top.

Maslow posited there were certain basis things each one of us needs if we are to prosper and to grow—

The first foundational layer is:

Food and shelter, Ok that makes sense.

The next one was safety.

Ok.

But the next one surprised me: belonging.

A basic human need

Necessary, right beyond food, shelter and safety, if we are to keep going up the triangle, the next level is self-esteem,

And then self-actualization, personal growth, being able to fulfill our potential.

Belonging. Love and belonging.

And I heard those words again, driving around town the next day

Listening to the Texas-born researcher Brene Brown speak about her research on shame, fear and vulnerability

That all sounds pretty dark but her Texas drawl and wisecracking spirit

Make it all pretty human

Brown describes herself as a 5th generation Texan

Her family motto? “Lock and load”

They were straight talking, hard living

“We didn’t **do** vulnerability,” she said, “**we** avoided it like a plague”

So when she found herself in social work grad school and realized the point wasn’t to fix people (“I was good at that,” she said, “good at being right and telling other people what to do”)

The point wasn’t to fix people but to “hold an empathic space where they could feel their feelings,” she said a word I can’t say here

Realized she was in the desperately wrong place.

So specifically in order to avoid vulnerability, she chose research as her chosen path

Ironically, it was that very research that dragged her kicking and screaming into vulnerability, her’s and our’s

Her work is great and I’ve learned a lot from it

But driving around in the car that day I heard the words again

“Love and belonging” she said,

“Love and belonging is an irreducible need of men, women and children.”¹

“I knew belonging was a big deal going into this research but I had no idea what a big deal it was.

Here’s the definition that came up

“Belonging is the innate human desire to be a part of something larger than us.

Because this yearning is so primal

We often try to acquire it by fitting in and seeking approval

Which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging

But often barriers to it.

True belonging only happens

¹ Brene Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability*.

When we present our authentic and imperfect selves to the world.”²

And, she says, and this was the kicker for her and for any of us who struggle from time to time with feeling we are enough

Good enough

Smart enough

Rich enough

Whatever enough

This was the kicker:

“Our sense of belonging

Can never be greater

Than our level of self-acceptance.”

Love and belonging.

Isn't that why a lot of us might step into a community like this one in the first place?

It is Rally Sunday and we gather back together here as women and men have been doing before us for hundreds of years,

The roots of our present-day community stretching as far back as 1747.

Think of that, 1747.

And so it was on Thursday that I found myself marching down the hill to meet with the town archivist

I had this instinct to go back to the start of things.

And so I found myself in that small room in the library

As the archivist brought out box after box of your earliest records

My excitement growing as I carefully turned the pages of a sermon written in 1749 by your first minister!

² Ibid.

I hold the pages gently in my hands:

They are yellowing

Fragile

Scrawled over with strokes of black ink

The letters scrambling over the pages with a kind of vivacity, a boldness that jumps out at me across time.

The text Luke is 12:2:

“Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.” (Revised Standard Version)

Or as Eugene Petersen translates it in his modern-day rendition of the Bible called *The Message*:

“You can’t keep your true self hidden forever; before long you’ll be exposed. You can’t hide behind a religious mask forever. Sooner or later the mask will slip and your true face will be know.”

.....

I hold the yellowing pages carefully, what I wouldn’t give to try and decipher what that first minister said about this text!

To one person it might be gibberish

To me it’s your very beginnings right before my eyes

Your roots.

.....

Rally Sunday, Love and Belonging.

But what do we belong **to**?

What is this place that draws us?

Yes a collection of individuals

Individuals who sometimes—on our good days-- demonstrate kindness, courage, integrity

We are drawn to that

We want our kids to be close to that as they grow up

And yes, we are also individuals who make mistakes, who stumble and fall

And if things go well, have the courage to admit it, fess up, make amends, try again.

We want our kids to see that too, don't we?

To learn something here about honesty and humility.

Yes, we're a collection of individuals but it's more than that

We're part of something larger than ourselves, something that has a history

That's been here long before we arrived

And hopefully will last way after we're gone

This spiritual community is about more than you and you and you

It's about more than me and ministers who come and go

It's a thread of people

Yearning

Seeking

It's a thread of devotion that goes back and back

Across time

Yes we come here for our own spiritual deepening and growth

To become perhaps more like those whole hearted people that Brene Brown describes

The ones that know how to rest and play

The ones that dare to show up and be seen

But we come here for me than just our own individual wants and needs
 We come here for something bigger, for an “us” that transcends time and space.

It’s Rally Sunday 2019 and I’m thinking about love and belonging,
 And I’m thinking what it’s like to be lost, even just a little bit
 And what it’s like to be found.

“What I mean, writes Frederick Buechner.
 Is that if we come to a church right, we come to it more fully and nakedly ourselves
 Come with more of our humanness showing
 Than we are apt to come to most places.
 We come With
 Muck on our shoes
 Foolsore and travel-stained with the dust of our lives upon us....”

We come here as we are....
 Because wherever it is that we truly belong
 Whatever it is that is truly home for us
 We know in our hearts
 That we have somehow lost it and gotten lost.
 Something is missing from our lives that we cannot even name—
 Something we know best from the empty places inside us all where it belongs.”

Something is missing from our lives that we cannot even name—
 Whatever it is that is truly home for us...we have somehow lost it and gotten lost.

We come back to this place--
Or we dare to step inside for the first time—
We do this for many reasons, I'd wager
But I wonder if one might be that we know on some level
That we've lost something
Or gotten lost
(Maybe a lot, maybe just a little)
And we want to start to find our way back home again.
It's like we've gotten off track somehow
And maybe this is a place where we can start to look for clues—
Where we can practice paying attention and look for the clues that are hidden in
plain sight,
In all the ordinary moments of our everyday lives—
Like a dog in a field in the sunshine.
Somehow we've gotten a little bit lost and perhaps this is a place we can come to
start finding our way back home.

Not to some magical mythical home
But back home to a part of us that goes deeper and truer
Back home to the part we don't show most people most of the time
We want to find our way back home
To some deep quiet place
A center
A spiritual place of honesty
Or bravery

That we long for
A place where we can let down and let go and just be for a while
At home in the universe
At rest in God's hands
However you describe it in the spiritual language you use.

If we come to church right we come with a little more of our humanness showing
We come here because sometimes there is a little part of us that feels lost
And wants to be found
And because we want to be with others who are stumbling around in the dark too
Not knowing all the answers
Not able to control all the outcomes
People who are simply human, as we are, and not afraid to claim that common
humanity
Doubting
Seeking
Thirsting
A little bit lost sometimes and wanting to be found again
By hope
Or gratitude
Or Joy

And so here we are, putting one foot in front of another
One day at a time
Trying to breathe

And notice

And love each other

And love ourselves

And love this beautiful and broken world in which we live

How good is to be together again in this beautiful sacred community

Welcome home.