

## **Found, Reclaimed and Professing**

September 12, In the Year of Our LORD, 2010

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Gloversville, New York

The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14 and Luke 15:1-10

Friday morning, I sat at my computer, sipped coffee, checked the internet's Weather Channel, scrolled down through what Yahoo thought was the most important news of the day, saw that the New Orleans Saints came back to beat the Minnesota Vikings the evening before, realized this is the first full weekend of the National Football League Season, clicked to the schedule, saw that Miami is playing Buffalo at 1pm today ... and paused. Somewhere in the back of my not yet quite awake brain a thought tried to develop. Then some caffeine kicked in and I remembered that I would *not* have to be concerned and rush over extra early to church on Sunday morning. Getting to church extra early was a task I undertook at Gates Presbyterian Church on the first Sunday that the Buffalo Bills played a home game. There might very well be some tasks I do as Pastor with which I need not concern myself – but this was one job no one else thought to do!

Why does a home Buffalo Bills game raise such concern that I needed to reach church earlier than usual? ... Why, in the grand scheme of things, in a world gone crazy with discord – (Could we not compose a litany of truly depraved behavior?) - from those who fly jets into skyscrapers or office buildings or fields in Pennsylvania killing thousands of innocents as occurred on 9/11, to people who want to burn the holy text of another peoples' faith (even though that text names *our* Jesus as a Prophet), to people dismissed from their jobs who return to kill co-workers, to those who want to prevent a Muslim Community Center from existing two blocks from where the Twin Towers once stood (innocent people of the Islamic faith died that day as well) ... and there I sat two mornings ago thinking about how I once raced to church in Rochester, New York on the first Sunday the Buffalo Bills played in Orchard Park, a full hour and half hours' drive away.

Therein lay the reason, for despite that within a couple hundred yards of the Gates church there is a massive parking lot for a mostly empty strip mall, people (with no connection at all to the Gates Presbyterian Church) gathered in the church parking lot to car-pool to Orchard Park for Buffalo Bills games. The good news is that they thought the church parking lot a safe place to leave their cars. The other good news is that these people always complied and moved as I asked. The not as great news is that it always came as somewhat of a surprise to these persons that the church parking lot for was needed in about two hours for nearly three hundred people gathering for, uh, ...worship and Sunday School!

Parking in a church lot for a sports event – even on a Sunday morning – is hardly a “big deal.” On the scale of poor or “bad” behavior, it hardly registers. Actually, this is more a confession about how even little things can be irritating when there are so many more profound examples

of inhumanity! When David wrote what we know as the fourteenth Psalm, God's people were apparently up to enough "no good" that it registered pretty high on God's sin-o-meter!

Remember these first three verses?

Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good.

The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God.

They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.

Echoing David four centuries later, we have these words of God as found in Jeremiah: (4:22)

'For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good.'

Certainly we see evidence in our own times of how the words of David's psalms written three thousand years ago and those of Jeremiah as recorded by Baruch and written twenty-five hundred years ago, are as timeless as they are timely. Now, as then, all too many people live and act as though they believe there is no God (capital "G" for the One God – not a little "g" god for which a definition might be an *undo* attachment to possessions, vices, or say,,, sporting events like Sunday afternoon football – which, we might add, is like a religion for some). And there are, unfortunately, to return to the more significant issues that cause people distress, far too many examples of "corrupt [and] abominable deeds" to challenge if not lay waste to peoples' faith, much less, hope! And do Jeremiah's words not sting? While some people might think that Old Testament's prophets are particularly true for today and jump to the wrong conclusion that *all* of Scripture speaks to them and them alone, the reality is that little has changed in the past millennia and – "my people are foolish, ... they are stupid children ... that have no understanding" are constant charges which humanity is due.

David's and Jeremiah's words, like those of so many other leaders and prophets whose words are recorded in Scripture, to say nothing of everyone who challenges people in the ways of faith, were intended to remind people of the ways of God – indeed of the ways of love, hope, grace and peace. So often the people of ancient times lost their way, forgot that they were God's children, and needed to find their way back! However, there are more ways to be "lost" than like Hansel and Gretel in some fairy-tale woods.

And ... as emotionally if not spiritually draining it is to lose ones job, house (as did so many in that neighborhood south of San Francisco this week in that natural gas line explosion), good health – just think of the ways people get lost in the wiles and wilds of a world with so much to distract ones attention that one can lose any sense of a proper grounding. It seems simplistic to tick off the vices to which so many can become so attached – from drink, to drugs, to sexual satisfaction devoid of even the semblance of love, to gambling, to hoarding (there are television shows about hoarders whose homes ought to be condemned by a health or fire department ...). Or perhaps it is the latest thrill to amaze the senses that attracts people like the bug to a

burning bulb. We need to remind ourselves that while some things are OK in moderation, when something takes *all* of our time and energy, and distracts us from all that is good, holy, uplifting and life-giving, then we are lost, need to find our way back, know that God and a faith community of sisters and brothers will reclaim us so that together all of us might profess if not celebrate unity, reconciliation, restoration ... family.

David and Jeremiah spoke not only to persons of faith but to their entire communities – because a people can lose their way collectively just as easily as they can as individuals. This is hardly the first time in American history that political discourse, ethnic bigotry, religious zealotry, and anti- (even legal) immigration fervor has been as rabid as it is today – but how are we going to find our way back from the abyss if the ways of hatred, me-first-ness, anyone who thinks differently than I should leave-ness is so loud as to drown out any voice or written words of reason, calm, acceptance, tolerance, forbearance? Where is the grace and love most of us think are bywords of our faith if not our national ethos? And without those key elements we profess as integral to who we are as a people, where on God’s earth are we going to find peace, joy, reconciliation, or cooperation?

The first verses of the fifteenth chapter of Luke are familiar to most of us. The parables of the lost sheep and lost coin serve as a prelude to the parable of the lost sons, the brothers in the story we call “The Prodigal Son.” Just as our younger disciples are downstairs with Dinah talking about more than a lost sheep and a lost coin – about what it means if not feels like to lose something only to find it again and to rejoice in that discovery, so we know that the shepherd and the woman losing things is only part of the story, that the parable is about the energy with which the lost was sought, about the joy when the lost was found, and the rejoicing *with others* when the loss could be set aside and all was whole again. As the shepherd and the woman called neighbors and friends together to rejoice at their good fortune, so the father of the “prodigal” son wanted to rejoice. (That the other son did not want to rejoice – as we recalled during a worship service earlier this year – is evidence that perhaps he was the one who was *really* lost.)

Despite the haughtiness of the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus was determined to mirror our Creator and Redeemer God’s desire to bring *all* people into the *one* fold, to seek those who are lost, to hope that *none* will fall by the wayside of life, and to make sure that the community revels and rejoices when the lost are found.

That the shepherd left the ninety-nine to find the one that was lost, that the woman searched so diligently for the coin that was lost – those serve as reminders that God ever seeks us – that as amazing as is God’s grace, how all the more amazing it is that God – and on God’s behalf, members of God’s community – that there is enough care to hunt us out in times of despair, reach out to us when we have turned away from all that is holy, and seek us when we are lost in the confusion and distractions of life so that we might be found, reclaimed, renewed, brought back into the community of the faithful so that we might rejoice together and profess the ways of grace, hope and love!

The fourteenth Psalm of David is not *all* doom and gloom about the sinfulness and brokenness of people in his day and age. These words, like the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son, end with words of hope and rejoicing.

O that deliverance for Israel would come out of Zion! When the LORD restores the fortunes of His people, Jacob shall rejoice, Israel shall be glad.

Do you hear the important caveat? As much rejoicing as there is in heaven, there is rejoicing amongst the people of Jacob and the people of Israel! If a member of a community of faith is lost, it is not just a matter of bringing that soul back, of the lost being found, of amazing grace being experienced once again in the depths of a single human soul. Finding the lost is also a matter of making a community whole again, ... of restoring harmony where there was discord, ... of finding grace where it was lacking, ... of knowing that no matter what wrongs are committed on this globe, we can come into God's presence not only looking for redemption, but rejoicing each and every time we know the amazing grace of God and salvation that is ours in and through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit!

Amen.