*Youth Sunday Senior Sermons*

February 12, 2023

*The Good Shepherd*

By

Finley Hoffman

from the pulpit of

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

The story from scripture I chose is The Parable of the Lost Sheep. When one sheep goes missing, the Shepherd does not forget about it. Instead, he goes searching for it, determined to bring it home. The first time I read through this passage, my initial thought was, “why?” He has an entire flock of 99 other sheep. Does losing one really make a difference? The answer I’ve come to now is, yes. It does make a difference. A big one, in fact.

As a kid, I largely felt indifferent about going to church. To me it was just another weekly activity that appeared on the calendar every Sunday. I didn’t dislike going to Sunday school. I knew that each time I would see a few friends that went to other schools and eat vanilla wafer cookies (a treat we never had at home). Most of all, I knew that it made my parents, especially my mom, happy to see their three daughters all dressed up, walking into the sanctuary side by side. And I know I speak for all three of us when I say seeing them happy made us happy.

So, I continued to return week after week. I traveled up through Sunday school, completed my confirmation year, and entered youth. Growing up, I attended movie nights held in the old Ed Building. I participated in Advent workshops, Casserole Blitzes, Wednesday Night Dinners, Vacation Bible Camp, and many other activities. I went to Kirkwood for the first time entering seventh grade. It’s one of the best decisions I have ever made, and I continued to return each year up to this past summer. Throughout these years I was constantly assured that God sees us and loves us. That God hears our thoughts and prayers and that we are called to worship God. At a young age, these words were just phrases I heard pastors repeat over and over again. Mostly found in scriptures or sermons I struggled to comprehend. But, even if I didn’t completely grasp the Biblical aspect of many of these activities or ideas, I enjoyed them, nevertheless.

I thought I was perfectly content with my current relationship with church and my faith. I’d gone to BMPC for as long as I could remember because I knew nothing different. I participated because I had friends there. This was my 99 sheep. I had surface level reasons to return each week, and at the time that seemed like enough. I did and said all the right things, but the one sheep that was missing was a secureness in my personal faith. What was missing was my confidence in being a part of BMPC, and my confidence in knowing, really knowing, that God loves *me*.

I did not experience a sudden change of heart, nor did I have an epiphany that led me to open my eyes and suddenly understand everything my Sunday school teachers, pastors, and elders taught me. No switch unexpectedly flipped. I simply got older, and the church became less of a place to see my friends and play games and more so a place of worship. I matured and realized that the piece I felt missing, the part I was looking for, was right in front of me, confidence in my own personal faith.

I became comfortable and secure enough to sit through a service by myself. I am enthusiastic about giving my input on the Youth Ministry Council or listening to a Session meeting as a Youth Elder (even though most of the topics go right over my head). I try to attend Student Serve, the high school small group, on Wednesday nights as much as possible because it’s a breath of fresh air for me from the usual stress of being a high schooler.

Most of all, finding my confidence in my faith, my one missing sheep, has led me to no longer feel the need to defend myself when one of my friends or anyone else brings up my commitment to my faith. Not many teenagers who aren’t a part of something similar understand how it could be fun to go to something like church camp for a week in the summer. Instead of talking down on activities like camp or making them seem like obligations, I own it. I now feel I have a personal connection to the church and God.

I still find it challenging to grasp the meaning of some scriptures. If you were to ask me to name certain people in the Bible, you would most likely not get the right answer, but I have learned to accept my imperfect knowledge. I am so grateful that I found this confidence and security. I know that I have a place at BMPC as well as a place in God’s heart, and so do you. So, I leave you with this: we must not be satisfied with the seemingly good enough of the 99, for we may never discover the joy that is the one thing that is missing.

Amen.

*The Sheep and the Goats*

By

Owen Yoder

from the pulpit of

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

Many of you already know this, but I lived with my parents in Egypt for two years when I was in 3rd and 4th grade. Living in a foreign country was difficult as a kid - attending an Egyptian school, not speaking Arabic, and saying goodbye to friends and family in the United States were all hard to deal with. On top of all of that, because the country went through a major revolution just a couple of days after we arrived, it was months before we were able to do all of the cool Egyptian sightseeing that I had been looking forward to. But after a while we settled into our family life there and learned to navigate all of these challenges.

But one aspect of living in the city that I never got used to was the widespread poverty around Cairo. On every street there was guaranteed to be at least one or two beggars of some kind. There were little girls who would sell Kleenex packs outside our church and women who sat along the sidewalks with their babies. We didn’t often give to people, though my dad would always make sure to buy at least one pack of Kleenex a week for a single Egyptian Pound. One of the beggars I remember the most was an old bearded man who sat cross-legged on the sidewalk on the way from our apartment to the train station. We would pass him every week on Fridays when we went to church, and every week I would ask my mom for money to give to him. I felt like it was only fair to give something because I knew that we had money and that he didn’t. I felt like we should be obligated to do something to help since even a little bit of help was within our power to give. I am not sure exactly what it was in my nine-year-old heart that compelled me to have so much compassion for this man, but it is an essential part of my experience in Egypt that I will never forget.

In the parable of The Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25, Jesus teaches his disciples about how to respond compassionately to those right in front of us who are so clearly in need. What Jesus knew was that the instinctive compassion of a child often wanes as we grow older, and so he gives them a way to understand how serving him and serving the most vulnerable are intertwined. When we are serving the hungry, the homeless and the prisoners, we are serving Jesus himself.

I like this passage because it shows how important helping others is. It gives us ideas about how to act as Christians. When we see a hungry person, to give food. When we see someone thirsty, to give a drink. When we see someone needing help of any kind, we are called to do what we can to help them. Even as simple as this is, as human beings we still need Jesus to compel us to be selfless and to orient our lives toward service.

In Egypt, we were given opportunities to help people in need all the time. So, it was easy for me to always be thinking about helping others while living there. But in Bryn Mawr, it is rare to see someone on the street who obviously needs help. And often in our community people go out of their way to hide the ways that they are in need. So as a church we seek out people to help. We feed the hungry through Casserole Blitzes and other hunger programs. We offer tutoring to school children. We contribute generously to support the work of the mission councils as they award grants to partners doing the work of compassion that Jesus describes.

Let’s not just remind ourselves to see Jesus in the faces of people in need, but let’s live and act as individuals and as a church so that we are regularly encountering and helping those who are vulnerable. No matter how small the act of kindness, it is always a good thing. Human compassion has the capacity not just to change the world, or the life of an individual but to change ourselves.

Amen.

*The Sower*

By

Katie McGuirl

from the pulpit of

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

The first time I remember hearing this story, I was in first grade. And I thought the Sower was, well, ridiculous. The Sower was clearly just a bad farmer. Why didn't he just plant the seed in good soil? It wasn't until I got older that I realized that this story, like all good stories, is a bit more complicated than that, and *this* story is supposed to teach. Specifically, to teach us about who our God is.

Foundations are essential - for people, for buildings, for roads.

Build a building on ground that isn't solid, and you get the leaning Tower of Pisa. Build a road on a rocky hill without smoothing it, and you can end up with a dangerous drive. Build your life based on an unsafe or unsupportive foundation; you probably won't thrive. When I read Jesus' parable about the Sower, I think about foundations.

In the parable, Jesus speaks of a farmer scattering his seeds. Some fall onto the road and are quickly eaten by crows. Some are thrown in the thorns and cannot grow because they get no sun, others land in shallow rocky soil, and even though they grow quickly, they cannot develop deep roots and promptly die. The last bit of seeds fall into the good soil and grow and thrive. The seeds with nonexistent or shaky foundations, like the road, the thorns, or the rocky soil, did not have what they needed to grow.

The foundation of my own faith was formed most especially by my family and this church. Growing up, my dad made sure I knew I was loved. I heard "I love you more today than yesterday" every night before bed. My mom made sure I learned how to function as an independent person. They pushed me in school and helped when I asked and even when I didn't. They knew when I needed help and even changed parts of their lives so that I might thrive.

And my parents did me a huge favor by raising me in the church. Before I could even form memories, I was baptized and welcomed into this amazing community. The days I spent on this campus, even the ones I cannot remember, helped make me who I am.

But growing up in this community wasn't necessarily without its anxieties. I remember vividly how terrified I was to move to the youth group. I was scared that the "big kids" wouldn't like me. I refused to attend church camp at Kirkwood for 2 years because I thought I would not fit in with the other kids. Thankfully, I eventually got over that fear and started to really enjoy youth group and even loved going to camp. I now love going to Student Serve and talking about God there in ways I can't do with my school friends. And I love the three-year-olds I work with on Sunday mornings.

Even though I got planted in this nutrient-rich soil, I've encountered thorns and rocks in the form of challenges, disappointments, and hurt feelings. It is only because of the strength of my roots that I could grow around the rocks and through the thorns and keep going. I may have a few torn leaves or bent stems, but by the grace of God, I keep growing.

My location is about to change, big time. I am going to college and will be on my own for the first time. And honestly, I am scared. My entire life, I have lived in one house and attended this church. I am worried I will jump and land in the thorns, on the road, or in shallow soil.

But then I remember that seemingly thoughtless Sower – who sows everywhere, no matter how perfect or imperfect the soil. Perhaps this parable isn't so much about us as the "good soil" as it is about the Good Sower who never stops planting.  The Sower is always sowing, even when we don’t know it.  To me, this Sower is God giving us chance after chance to find our “good soil.” I take this as a comfort. No matter how bad things get or how much I struggle, there is someone in my corner, planting more seeds, even when I don’t notice.  As I move into this next stage of my life, I pray that the Good Sower will pull me again and again back to the foundation of my family and my faith. May we all remember that the Good Sower is always sowing, and may we respond in faith as the good soil, always seeking Christ's love.

Amen.

*The Lost Coin*

By

Kathryn Chang

From the pulpit of

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

When we chose parables for our theme this year, I was overwhelmed by the possible choices, but this scripture in particular resonated with me. In this reading, a woman loses one of her ten precious coins. She is distraught after learning of her loss. She lights a lamp and sweeps her house to find her valuable coin. She eventually finds it and immediately wants to rejoice with her friends and family over her success. This scripture reminds us to hold hope in God’s love; though you may stumble, God’s love will continue to search, like the woman for her lost coin.

In October of 2021, I was hospitalized for severe lower abdominal pain, thought by doctors as a guaranteed case of appendicitis. A full day and night in the emergency room filled with many tests, numerous doctors, and no food or water led to a three am wake-up call from a random doctor. I opened my sleepy eyes and saw a shadow standing over me, gently tapping my shoulder and whispering, “Kathryn?” The man looked into my eyes and told me that all my results showed no signs of appendicitis, which shocked the doctors since they had already ruled out so many other possibilities. I was turning into a medical mystery at this point.

Following the doctors’ advice, the next day, I was admitted to the adolescent floor of the hospital. I expected to be diagnosed by the doctor, treated, and then sent home, but my experience turned out to be everything but that. I was confused with other patients, reprimanded for experiencing pain, verbally threatened, and forced to stay in my room as my roommate was force-fed and repeatedly became sick. As a doctor, my father taught me that good doctors always protect their patients no matter what, so I was lost and confused about how I could feel so helpless and *un*protected.

My traumatic time at the hospital was not even 48 hours, yet I felt the impact for months. My smiles slowly turned to blank stares, my laughter grew forced, and my responses to the question, “How are you?” became fake. I felt perpetually helpless and stuck in one place, as I had in the hospital. I grew scared to be authentic, trusting, and vulnerable with the people in my life who cared about me.

For me, the ten coins in this scripture represented significant parts of my personality. Losing my joy was like the “coin” the woman lost. But unlike the scripture, I did not initially know I had lost it. Like when you lose your keys, you don’t realize you’ve lost them until you get in your car on a chilly day and want to turn the heat on, but you can’t start the car. That is how my daily life felt for months as I tried to participate in activities that once brought me joy. While trying to pull myself slowly out of this spiral, I lost hope in myself and God’s love. I felt that I had been swept too far astray from my previous self to ever find my way back to her again. I started to give up on ever finding my coin again, despite my best efforts to “light a lamp and sweep the rug,” like the woman in the scripture.

Looking back, I realize now it wasn’t me searching for the lost coin of myself, but God searching for me. By God’s grace and with the help of people who love me, after months, I felt an unfamiliar sensation of hope. I began to believe that I was stronger than my challenges as I felt God’s presence again. While I’m sure there will be tough times again, I now know God’s love for me is unconditional, even when I’m at my lowest and maybe can’t feel it.

Though my experiences over the past couple of years have led to some of the lowest moments of my life, the lessons I learned about myself and about God are invaluable. I have learned to live in the present and appreciate when I experience moments of happiness. I have learned to love silence and the unspoken words that come with it. I have learned self-awareness and how to recognize when I am not feeling like my healthy self. But overall, the biggest lesson I have learned from my challenges is that no matter how far we may feel from God, God’s love unconditionally pursues us, rejoicing as we become the people that God created us to be.

Amen.