

“Found”

Luke 15:1-10

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“Intern Jordan” joined others in going door-to-door on Wednesday evening.

Their objective was to invite our neighbors to this week’s block party.

They had snazzy-looking brochures in hand and a smile on their face.

In Jordan’s case, he also had lots of crazy hair dancing around like some Head and Shoulders commercial.

My daughters want to cut his hair. Sampson screams, don’t do it, intern Jordan!

At one of the houses down the road here on Central, the person not only gave Jordan the stink eye, but also said, “No thanks, I’m an atheist.”

Ok then.

Not something you always hear in Zeeland, and yet this neighbor is not alone.

In reviewing the Pew Center’s Study on Religion, the US public, even in Zeeland, is becoming less and less religious.¹

Their study compared religious trends in the span of 7 years—statistics taken in both 2007 and 2014.

In that span, the number of people who described themselves as religiously affiliated dropped from 83.1% to 76.5%.

At the same time, the percentage of responders who attend worship only a few times a year or less has risen to 49.6%.

In answering how important religion is to your life, the numbers for those who said very important decreased as the numbers for those who said not so important or not at all important increased.

According to this study, the frequency of prayer is decreasing while the age gap within religious affiliation is only growing-- meaning that the younger the generation the less likely the person is to get involved in religious practices.

Already within our current reality, 1 out of every 5 Americans considers themselves religiously unaffiliated.

Some of these unaffiliated are like our neighbor down the street—persons who identify as atheist—people who don’t believe in God.

Some of these unaffiliated are agnostic—people who don’t really care either way.

And yet, accordingly to Pew, over 70% of these religiously unaffiliated are people who have some background in the church; (or) who believe in God or, at least, a Higher Power; who even describe themselves as spiritual, but just not religious.

Lillian Daniels, a UCC pastor now in Iowa, wrote a very helpful book playing off that title, “When spiritual but not religious is not enough.”²

She is one of the lead crusaders in trying to engage this ever growing reality.

The religiously unaffiliated are also called, “nones” since they check the “none” box on many of these surveys.

Nones. N. O. N. E. S.³

Lillian helpfully describes four types of nones:

There are the “**No Ways**”—persons hurt by the church.

¹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>

² Lillian Daniel. “When Spiritual But Not Religious is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, even the Church” (Jericho Books, 2014).

³ <https://pres-outlook.org/2016/01/four-kinds-of-nones-lillian-daniel-speaks-at-apce/>.

The Catholic priest scandal and subsequent cover-up is a cause of such hurt.

How we've wrestled with issues like divorce and homosexuality is a cause of such hurt.

The lack of intentional space for personal pain and hard questions of faith are causes of such hurt.

No Ways are tough to for the church to love because of the very real scarring that has occurred over time.

They are rightfully cynical of the church's credibility—rightfully hesitant to be vulnerable and burned or banned or bashed yet again.

Next are the "**No Longers.**"

These are people whose relationship with the church has simply faded over time.

--Maybe life got too busy.

--Maybe the transitions became too intense.

--Maybe it was a spiritual laziness that formed new habits—new priorities and rituals that didn't involve the church.

The **No Longers** aren't necessarily angry with the church, these folks just don't see its importance.

Many of my high school friends fit this category—maybe some of your friends and relatives do, as well.

The **No Ways** and **No Longers** have children who become the **Never Haves**.

This is the third and growing category: the **No Ways**, the **No Longers**, and now, the **Never Haves**.

Unlike older generations, **Never Haves** really don't have the muscle memory of religious practice.

They are some of my daughter's friends who have never heard of the Lord's Prayer or the word "reconciliation" in the context of faith.

The **Never Haves** aren't running away from something nor have they chosen not to prioritize church—they honestly have a blank slate and are being raised more with a general morality than something more intentionally Christian.

Many of the **Never Haves** truly never have experienced a winsome articulation of the gospel or a community of faith that embodies unconditional love.

Daniels' final group is called, the **Not Yets**.

These are people who can be incredibly curious about faith—about the meaning of life—about the problem of evil—about sex and theology—the meaning of church membership and everything else.

In my experience, **Not Yets** are people who might want to talk with me about the upcoming election over a beer; who want to know what the church believes about very concrete social issues; who might even dip their toes in churches—at least, enough so to see how truly hospitable our community really is—or how authentic our actions really are.

In fact, in my experience **Not Yets** are a little skeptical, but they aren't belligerent; they may have some hard questions for the church, but they are also genuinely seeking after meaning and truth.

In talking about the "NONES", I'm describing 20% of the population-- a percentage only increasing by the year.

We could say that 80% is good enough for now; that as long as we have money in the plate and some butts in the pews we're good enough.

We could even be incredibly judgmental as if the sheep currently outside of the fold are somehow less worthy of our Shepherd's love.

They are merely tax collectors and sinners, we could say.

They deserve their exclusion-- they are none of our concern.

They sleep with the wrong people.

They vote for the wrong candidate.

They drink too much.

They pray too little.

They are unfaithful.

Immoral.

Unseemly.

Damaged in every way.

Tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes, criminals hanging on the cross, lepers, misfits, atheists living on Central Avenue, undocumented workers picking fruit north of town, riff raff incarcerated in the Ottawa County Jail, people deeply hurt by the church, and everyone else we consider as “other.”

These people are none of our concern, right?

Jesus answers this rhetorical question by introducing us to the shepherd who left the 99 sheep in the wilderness so as to seek after the 1 who was lost.

When found, this sheep isn't treated like one to be excluded, ridiculed, or blamed.

It is just the opposite:

Verse 5: when he has found the sheep, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

Better yet, he gathers his friends and neighbors to celebrate that this one particular sheep is now home.

-This is the same of the woman who turns the house upside down to seek after the one lost coin.

-This the same of the prodigal father who waits with a passionate concern every single day for the potential return of his younger son.

All three cases, the return of what is lost is a cause of great celebration.

This is God, who hungers for everyone- *everyone*- to not only experience such love but to be the very reason for the celebration, itself.

Jesus makes it clear that his ministry is to be such good news to any and all who check the box, none, or who, themselves, have been excluded or ignored for way too long.

The Jewish leaders in our text were upset that Jesus not only welcomes the outsider, but that he actually shared table fellowship with those they considered unclean and unworthy.

In other words, Jesus didn't just parachute in for a quick photo-op; no, he chose to share his fuller life with these sheep.

By share, I really mean share.

It wasn't a bible tract left in the mailbox or some turn-or-burn street corner sermon.

He got his hands dirty.

He invested himself fully.

He engaged; he shed tears with us; he bleed for us.

Indeed, Jesus entered real lives and shared his everything with those who normally received mere table scraps.

Better yet, he sacrificed his own life—like that of a Good Shepherd—so that such persons—including each one of us—can experience the grand celebration of being found.

That is who God is:

-Relentless in seeking after us.

-Unyielding in destroying all vestiges of sin and separation.

-Ferocious in reconciling us in and through Jesus Christ.

That is what God wants for us:

-Freedom from sin, not its captivity.

-The joy to live life to its fullest, not to fear and dread it.

-The knowledge and trust that we really do belong to Christ-- that we aren't worthless, ugly, expendable.

That is also what God expects from us:

- To join the relentless pursuit of the lost and lonely.
- To participate in unyielding passion for reconciled relationships.
- To share our very excitement for what God is doing in our midst—what God promises to fulfill our midst:
 - Turning swords into plowshares.
 - Giving hope to the hopeless.
 - Humbling the proud.
 - Exalting the meek.
 - Converting the hardest of hearts.
 - Comforting the sick and downcast.
 - Seeking the lost.
 - Giving sight to the blind.
 - Loving the unlovable.
 - Forgiving the unforgivable.
 - Celebrating the beauty of this world.
 - Cultivating a true passion for this world.
 - Giving us purpose.
 - Granting us peace.
 - Pushing us to go deeper and wider for the sake of those sheep currently outside of the fold—persons who may feel as if no-one really cares; as if there is no place for them within the church.

It is our goal to prove such persons wrong.

Not by belittling them or shaming them or pushing them further and further away, but rather, by welcoming them with open arms and by eating meals with them;
 by listening to them and creating safe space for them to experience the Holy Spirit within a community of forgiveness and mercy;
 by doing what Christ did in sharing life with them in all of its messiness and honesty and excitement;
 by not giving up on them or upon anyone knowing that God refuses to give up on us; refuses to throw in the towel; refuses to end the relentless pursuit of even one lost sheep.

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