

Lost in Lexington

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC

Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

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John 15:1-8

15:1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.

15:2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

15:3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

15:4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

15:5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

15:6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

15:7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

15:8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Prayer

Sermon

I got lost in Lexington this week.

I went for a walk, starting from Pilgrim, with much on my mind. At first, every few houses, I stopped to take pictures of gardens, spring blooming trees, flowers where once there were only bulbs. You know - Easter.

I took some deep breaths. I kept walking, kept thinking, kept breathing, turned a corner, turned another corner, walked a ways, and found myself at a dead end. I doubled back and turned through a street I thought I knew, and found myself in conservation land. There's a lot of conservation land around here, which is a blessing, and trees really help me breathe. Being relatively certain that the church was just on the other side of this little pocket of wilderness, I kept walking. But I kept being lost. I got to the end of the conservation land and emerged between houses I didn't know, and I turned in what must be the direction of the church but I wasn't sure. Lost. But it wasn't a panicky sort of lost, no one was waiting for me, and I knew I wasn't really lost, I was walking distance from homebase. Nor was it a bereft sort of lost, someone or something important lost forever. I was just displaced.

Yes, I made it back to the church. No, I could not particularly retrace my steps for you. Yes, I intend to get lost like that again soon.

Here's the blessing of that lost-time. I spent more time learning the land and the landscape and the neighborhood of the church than I have in the last year, when CoVid19 has made my time physically at church more compressed and constrained. This week, though I didn't choose to be lost, discovering where I was gave me a chance for a certain rooting in this place.

Diana Butler Bass speaks of loss and dislocation in this moment in our common lives as Christians in a recent article, "Religion After Pandemic."¹ First, she speaks of what is lost as grief and lament, for so much. "We need to grieve what is gone, yes. But that is not the only task ahead." She continues, "*Lost* doesn't just refer to what is *gone*. It also means that which is mislaid, out of place, dislocated. Sometimes lost just means that we're lost. And that is the other task for the post-pandemic world: to help others find what has been lost, to point the way beyond the thicket. We need to find ourselves again; we need to be relocated in the world."

For the last 14 months we've been lost...lost as people grieving; lost as people displaced and dislocated. And I'm thinking of this metaphor for us as a congregation. A few years ago, you experienced being lost and dislocated in a time of conflict. Then, you were courageous enough and blessed enough in an interim time to take out the map and find yourselves upon it again, and set a new direction. Part of that new direction included a pastoral transition which was just about complete when CoVid hit, and the map was torn out of our hands and we were all lost again.

¹ https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/religion-after-pandemic?r=45vbf&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&utm_source=facebook&fbclid=IwAR2OPIJ27015VkVzxxzjK4snXPo0eLyuZLr9aTYu8Z6ZF85O_8WDGxYjxis

But, it's interesting to me: this congregation might have been knocked off the map but we didn't get separated from each other. We have held together in this time. We have abided in God and abided in each other. Certainly there were moments we felt a little panicky, not knowing what was around the next corner. But we held together.

And now...well, most of us are cautiously optimistic that around the next corner is at least a milemarker or a road sign if not a road we recognize.

To repeat Diana Butler Bass, now, "We need to find ourselves again; we need to be relocated in the world."

We need to be relocated *in the world*.

This happens when communities experience disasters. CoVid has been a disaster for the whole world and it's not over yet. Folks who've spend their lives thinking about how to recover from disaster mark several phases. The first is the impact phase when folks are dealing with immediate survival and aren't making longterm plans. CoVid's impact phase isn't even over for a lot of our neighbors. But we might be starting to see past that.

Then comes the Short Term Recovery stage which is probably where we are now? - and the Long Term Recovery stage. The Long Term Recovery stage is when the community integrates and lives into the meaning of the disaster in the community. We don't know that the same calculation will apply to CoVid19 but certainly the Long Term Recovery stage will be measured in years. One of the markers of this first stage of recovery is re-locating ourselves in a changed landscape. Asking what we've learned. Imagining the post-CoVid future we want.

The blessing of this moment is that as we are seeing a changed landscape, we get to imagine our place in that landscape. Looking to the future, informed by this season, it's possible for our vines to bear fruit.

For this next season, in this new landscape, we get the opportunity to bear much fruit, in this place but not just literally Coolidge Ave - we can bear good fruit.

God is a gardener, hands in the soil, nurturing the land, rooting us for growth. And we know what fruit Pilgrim Church would bear.

You've said it:

A welcoming home to all spiritual seekers
Making a difference in our world,
By fusing our Christian faith with everyday life and
Serving God by serving others.

That's our mission statement and that's a description of good fruit. Over the next couple of weeks I want to reflect more on our mission statement as we move forward into this new time, together, guided by our mission and values.

We are at a different place on the map but that doesn't mean we have to get back to where we were. Indeed maybe the lessons of this time take us in the direction God wanted us to go all along.

It seems worthwhile to say:

As individuals, and households, we have also been lost and dislocated. As we relocate in a new landscape, we may also have a new direction to go.

Let me close with these words of poet Wendell Berry:

*There will be
a resurrection of the wild.
Already it stands in wait
at the pasture fences.
It is rising up
in the waste places of the cities
When the fools of the capitals
have devoured each other
in righteousness,
and the machines have eaten
the rest of us, then
there will be a second coming
of the trees. They will come
straggling over the fences
slowly, but soon enough.²*

Amen.

² https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/religion-after-pandemic?r=45vbf&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&utm_source=facebook&fbclid=IwAR2OPIJ27015VkVzxxzjK4snXPo0eLyuZLr9aTYu8Z6ZF85O_8WDGxYjxis