

F-C-C-B-!

First Congregational Church Branford

Luke 15:1-7; September 15, 2019

Rev. Suzanne Personette

Last week's scripture story took place just prior to this one in which Jesus talked with the crowds about salty discipleship - remember that? - which means to stand up for what you believe in, and I talked about standing up for FCCB! What happens next in the story is the outcasts come in closer to listen to Jesus, along with the Pharisees and Scribes who just can't forget what it is they don't like about Jesus - that he has a habit of receiving sinners and eating with them. In response to their grumbling, Jesus tells them a parable of mercy, and God's unbounded joy when the lost are found:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

(Rev. Suz wearing cheerleader outfit)

Okay, well, we may not have been lost over the summer, but God sure is rejoicing to have found us back together again. It's God's Rally Day, too, right?

Hey, Hey are you ready? (double clap)

Are you ready? (double clap)

To play (clap)

Say, go church

Say, Go team

FCCB all the way!

(pom-poms)

We've got Razzmatazz! Pep, Punch, and Pizzazz!

FCCB Believers got Razzmatazz!

Say, Razzmatazz!

Stronger than steel,

Hotter than the sun;

FCCB won't stop,

'til they get the job done!

We are the Believers,

And we can't be beat

Because we got the power,

to knock you off your feet!

Yeah, Yeah,

Do We Rock?

Say, Yeah, Yeah

Take it to the Top?

Say, Yeah, Yeah

Are we gonna stop?

Say, No way!

We are Team Believers! FCCB!

Okay, so, put that away for a bit. Let's go back to Jesus, who really does know how to irk those in power, who grumble over who he makes friends with. He chooses a story about a shepherd because shepherds had scandalous reputations, and were generally avoided as outcasts. To hear a rabbi lift up a shepherd would've greatly shocked the crowd. And, greatly disturbed the Pharisees and Scribes!

If Jesus wanted to shock us today, I think maybe he'd talk about God going in search of the lost sheep in America - refugees at the border. But, when I read the story this week I thought about our community and how we miss one another when we're absent, particularly when we're gone for two Sundays or more. I know how much it means to people when they get a call or an email from one of you and you say, *I've missed you. Where've you been, the place isn't the same without you, are you coming back?* For some who get this call they're like, *You've missed me? No one's ever noticed when I was gone.* Your call means the world to them. When we've gone missing, or when we're lost, hurting out there, we wanna

know that someone is looking. God always sees you, is searching for you. But, sometimes you want flesh and blood to find you, right? You want to know you matter to flesh and blood.

And, you do. At FCCB!

I was reading in the Upper Room devotional about this new mom who'd had an illness for 11 years. She was also anxious and depressed. She was homebound and isolated from others, lost, and she prayed every night that she'd make friends. She'd also been agonizing over how she was going to give her baby a happy and active life. When she felt God nudging her to go to her church and her church's coffee hour for the first time in nine years, she was filled with fear. It might seem like a small challenge, but when you're shy, when you're hurting, it's hard. But, she got the Holy Nudge. Her *willingness* to go changed her life. It just so happens that a lovely young couple with a baby the same age introduced her to a group of people that helps families through the week. The woman now has a church and these other folks around her who support and cheer her on, *and* with whom she prays and worships God. Because she went with the Holy Nudge and went to coffee hour. And, her child has a best friend to grow up with. The woman was found. Right in the midst of community. Right where God wanted her. An answer to her prayer.

As Eleanor Roosevelt said, *you must do the thing you think you cannot do*. When you take a risk, even something that seems small like going to coffee hour, heaven will find you.

We cheer for that woman, and we cheer for FCCB in the year ahead when it comes time to do something it thinks it cannot do:

Hey, you FCCB fans,
Clap your hands! ...
Say, Go FCCB Go...
Hey, You FCCB Fans
Let's see you wave your hand!....
Say, Go FCCB Go...

All right, in the story, some people point out that it was foolish for the shepherd to temporarily risk abandoning the 99 sheep in the wilderness to find the one who is lost. But, Jesus wants the *one* who has been tossed aside, the one who is hurt in some way to know just how treasured and significant they are - that God is going to pursue them. The one matters! And, when God brings them home on his shoulders, he's going to throw a celestial party - how's that sound?! God as a cheerleader, not a stern taskmaster or judge or scorekeeper. God is Rah Rah! I want you to think of God as a cheerleader for you!

Anyway, Jesus beckons the pharisees and scribes to join him, to be a part of *the searching of the outcast*, no longer a part of the outcasting, and bringing them *into* the fold.

It doesn't mean when they're brought into the fold that they're with all of we perfect people! No. They just now belong to a family of sinners, saved by grace, who say, *welcome, there's hamburgs and hotdogs. Come eat with us. We're all just hungry together.*

Speaking of lost sheep, my son, Abraham has now been at college in Rhode Island for 2 weeks, and feels lost. He's homesick, and misses his high school friend group. He wanted to come home this weekend. So, like the shepherd, Ken and I went to get our lost sheep on Friday. But, I told Abe that he reminds me of the Israelites, who, when Moses *implored them forward to the Promised Land*, they wanted to return to Egypt, to what they knew as home - Mom and dad, friends, the daily familiarities. *I wanna go back!* We brought him home, but I know he doesn't really belong there anymore. He's going to have to learn that a lost sheep has to stay right in place and be found *right where they are*. Abe can't be found in the past. While a part of me wants to return to the security of my lamb under my foot, I, too, can't go back...

And, FCCB, you can't go back... to a time when the church was golden. *The Promised Land isn't back there*. It's on up ahead with the minister God wants to bring here - who won't be a clone of some past beloved minister. That time is gone, it's over. Before a new chapter can begin you have to close the old one. I promise you that the Promised Land is up ahead - it's not back there. Can you think on this, FCCB, *the best is yet to be...*

Wherever we are today, may we take heart in the prophet Isaiah's words, where God says, *do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*

God has promised to find us, to make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Come on, Believers, what's your battle cry?
V-I-C-T-O-R-Y! What's that spell?? Victory!
Come on, crowd, what's your battle cry?
V-I-C-T-O-R-Y! What's that spell?? Victory!
Victory to the Believers!

Lastly, whenever we preach these lost and found sermons someone always says we have to go out and get members who've stopped coming to church. We

have to accept that some people don't wanna be found! *There's a difference between those who are lost and those who have left!* We have to let people go. I told the lost sheep story today for *you* who have felt lost, and want to be found - there are enough people here and out there who *want* to be found. It's also a reminder to invite the outcast into our fold. If you know someone who is hurting, like the woman in the Upper Room devotional, go and get her or him. *Tell me, and I'll go.* We'll show them mercy, bring them here to you good folks, and we'll feed them, and rejoice!

S-U-C-C-E-S-S

That's the way we spell success

FCCB! and the Promised Land

Prepare the way!

Amen.