

Throwing Our Lot In
January 17, 2016
John 10:1-11, Psalm 23

For the next few months in Sunday school, we are going to try something new, a program called Godly Play, which you've probably heard mentioned a few (or a lot of!) times now. It's directed toward younger kids under 7 or so, what may (I hope!) be a growing group here. Kids this age are very concrete thinkers. They like to see and touch and play to interact with and learn about their world. Yet they also have an innate spirituality, a sense of how they are connected to other people and to God. They begin to explore this spirituality as they are given language and images for communicating about it.

The Godly Play program was written with this in mind. It encourages each child to respond to that day's story in their own way, through art and building and play, knowing that God made them with their own particular mix of tendencies and ideas. This includes us as adults too. God made us with our own responses, our own mix of tendencies and ideas to offer the world.

Jesus knew this. Jesus knew that people are innate storytellers and story-listeners. Jesus knew that people are creative and imaginative, each with our own way of communicating and responding to our world. Jesus also knew that sometimes people want clear, quick answers when sometimes what God offers requires patience and trust in the midst of ambiguity.

And so in Jesus' teachings, we get a lot of parables. Parables are extended metaphors that invite listeners in, invite us to see ourselves in them, invite us to play with the metaphor and find meaning. These parables take some time to digest. They need time to sit inside of us. They don't have one clear meaning—they are mysterious even to the disciples. Jesus explains them some but also leaves gaps for our own imaginations to engage.

And the parables are alive today. Today, both here in worship and in church school, we will be exploring the Parable of the Good Shepherd. On the screen is a photo of what the scene looks like as the kids will see it. It is this scene that the storyteller who came to teach us about Godly Play last weekend used to tell the story. Echoing the 23rd Psalm, she moved the shepherd figure through the green grass, as he invited the sheep to follow him. She moved him over to the still waters, and the sheep followed. She moved him over to the dark places, as he guided the sheep through them safely. She stressed that the shepherd loves the sheep and cares for them, makes sure they are protected and safe, something that kids understand from a young age.

Then she invited us to think about this scene. "I wonder how the shepherd feels when the sheep follow." "I wonder what is hiding in those dark places." "I wonder if it is crowded to have all those sheep in that one pen." "I wonder if maybe the sheep feel safe... or if they feel trapped."

Well, when I first saw her show us that pen on the green grass, my mind went right to the similar pen that we had constructed for our daughter Eve the day before. Eve is crawling around now and getting into things that aren't the best for her to get into, so it was time to make her a little play area where we know she's safe. Maybe Eve feels trapped when we put her in there. Or maybe she feels secure. Maybe she would rather explore the big house full of baby dangers, or maybe she just stands at the gate because she likes having something to help her practice pulling herself up to standing position. I don't know.

But regardless, and it's hard to predict ahead of time, sometimes something someone says sticks in your head, and for me, this thought about being trapped has been in my head since. Do the sheep ever feel trapped? Do we as people immersed in a culture of mobility and movement and being presented with ever new and exciting experiences, do we ever feel trapped by the natural limits of our lives, of our time, of our relationships? [pause] Do we ever feel trapped by the natural limits of our lives, our time, our relationships?

Sajan and I just finished watching a show on Netflix called Master of None written by Aziz Ansari, an Indian American comedian, who comments on things like life in NY in your 20s and 30s, on his relationship with his immigrant parents, and on being an aspiring actor. Many of the early episodes chronicle his difficulties with dating, with finding someone he likes who likes him back. Common story. Well, then he runs into an old acquaintance, Rachel, and they click. They have fun together. They like similar things. Sure, sometimes they fight about silly things too. But they have something good together. They know each other, and they get each other, and for two years, they are happy.

And then, as perhaps is ought to happen, they start to get antsy. They start to fear being in this relationship 100%, however good it is. What if there is someone else out there who is better for me, who doesn't have the same annoying little habits, who is just a little bit more in tune with me?, they both wonder. What if there are things I'm supposed to do with my life that I can't do if I'm tied to one person in one city? The questions linger. And Rachel shares that she wants to move to Tokyo to explore the world so she doesn't regret not making the most of being 30.

The thing about this kind of self-critical comedy is that it hits so deep into what is sad but true about our culture. It is hard to find deep and lasting relationship, hard to find lasting community in a time when we are encouraged to pick and choose and shop around for the best thing, that best thing that is always on the horizon and not quite here, something to always be striving for, shopping for, waiting for. And more than that, or at the core of that, the thing that really gnaws at me, is that a sense can creep in that things—and people—are replaceable.

A few years back a relative moved away from the East coast, saying she was getting tired of living here. When I asked her if she was sad to leave her friends and her church,

she told me, “If you can only be happy in one place, there’s something wrong. I’ll find new friends and a new church.”

In one sense, she’s right. If we aren’t happy where we are, there’s a chance we won’t be happy somewhere else either and vice versa. But I also know that being rooted in one place has value, has irreplaceable value. Whatever array of options our high-speed, technologically-laden society might present us with, there’s value in not just leaving when you get bored or when it gets messy. There’s value, irreplaceable value, in being rooted *this* place with *these* people, the ones already around you. There’s value in throwing in your lot, in throwing in your heart.

An online dictionary defines throwing in your lot as deciding to work with a particular person or group whatever happens. Now of course, there are some important limits to “whatever happens”—withstanding violence or abuse or mistreatment is not what we’re asked to do. But what I’m thinking of is throwing in our lot in the general sense of committing to one place and one people in a climate when we can easily change locations or relationships if one place doesn’t work out or if we decide we don’t like these people here.

That’s not to say there’s anything wrong with making a change when we need to—sometimes we need to, sometimes we’re called to—but that in the midst of the rapidly shifting expectations and norms around us, there is value in throwing your lot in here, in throwing your heart in here. It can be scary to put ourselves into this particular place, to these particular people, quirks and all, not just until something better presents itself. Yet there is deep reward in putting our all in and seeing what grows because of it.

It seems to me that that’s what Jesus did. Jesus threw his lot in with a small bunch of fishermen, tax collectors, and prostitutes. He throws his lot in with them and makes them his people, not just for the time being but for the long run—for eternity.

Now, I’m aware that I’m saying all this as someone who has chosen to be an itinerant minister. Perhaps it’s because of the joys and challenges of changing communities that I feel the way I do about this. But I do believe that church offers us the opportunity to commit to these people sitting beside us and behind us, these irreplaceable people. Church is a way we practice and live Jesus’ commitment to a group of people, a people which includes us. However many exciting options might be out there, we put our lot in with Jesus and his sheep. (And from what I hear, sheep are not the most pleasant-smelling of animals!) But we put our lot in and trust that God is in it with us. We put our lot in and trust that God is in it with us.

Franklin Lakes United Methodist Church is a community that knows this. I say all of this because you know it and it’s worth affirming, worth honoring, worth celebrating. It is grounding and special. It is one of the many beautiful things a community like this offers to the surrounding world. It offers another way, another perspective on what matters. It’s something to affirm and honor and celebrate.

And so that one thought from the Godly Play storyteller, “I wonder if the sheep felt safe... or if maybe they felt trapped,” has stuck with me. It has let the parable sit inside me and grow and invite me to consider something I might not have otherwise considered. Parables work that way, slowly challenging our perspectives and assumptions, inviting us to see something in a new way, in this case for me about the tension between freedom and commitment, which is really a false tension.

Because something we find in commitment to our community is that there is such freedom in it too, an unexpected freedom. In John 10:9, Jesus says, “Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” We come in and go out and find pasture. In the structured classroom environment of the Godly Play program, kids are encouraged to have the freedom to explore and play and create. In the commitments we make to our families and community, we are encouraged to have the freedom to explore what matters to us and to make mistakes along the way as we work at becoming our best selves. Whatever our cultural milieu, people long for this freedom that comes through rootedness. In rootedness, our branches are able to grow strong and flower and bear fruit.

The Good Shepherd is one who wants to give us roots. He is the one who leads us to the green pastures and the still waters that feed our souls. He calls us to be among these particular sheep, and his voice leads us home. He throws his lot in with us, and we can throw our lot in with him, which means we throw our lot in with each other, the people we walk the journey with.

Amen.