

Many years ago ... I went to a nearby church, a Baptist Church (First Baptist Church of Needham actually) and an elderly leader of the church said emphatically a couple of times, "You have to come back when our minister is here... you have to meet him!" I thought to myself, for a 80-something lady to be that insistent, he must be a heck of a guy. Sure enough, the pastor there was very charismatic and engaging, and in a short time I ended up working as his assistant pastor for the next 4-5 years! The point is THE INVITE, and actually, in keeping with today's scripture, I may have been a bit "lost" at the time; I was certainly between jobs, looking for new direction, for new calling, and the elderly deacon may have sensed that. We all go through our lives with times of being lost or lonely, needing a new project or perhaps some new friends. I'm sure I mentioned one fine sermon by Rev. Laura Biddle where she talked about the her reality of being lost and found, lost and found, over and over again in life. So When Jesus says a shepherd will put a priority on the sheep that is lost, I believe that applies to all of us at different times!

There is always someone in our lives looking for direction, even looking for a major turn-around that the Bible calls "repentance." Some people define repentance as a 180 degree turn, yes, an entire change of life, and surely this kind of conversion can easily be called salvation... from old ways, destructive actions, habits, and addictions. But just as surely, there are *levels* of sin and repentance... simply habits and demeanors that do well to be changed. Following the way of Jesus will surely change personal habits in all of us as we commit to become more loving, more just, more humble, more servant-like etc! All of us benefit from being invited into the community of Christ... and that is what I want to emphasize this morning: *community*!

There is always someone in our lives who needs not only a new direction or turn-around of inner life, but someone who is simply looking for more friendship, more connection that communities offer.

So when we think about Jesus' story about the lost sheep, what dawned on me was the importance of the image of *the flock!* The flock is an image of *community!* The sheep feel safe and surrounded by "camaraderie" if you will. The very fact of being alone makes that one lost sheep most vulnerable to wolverine predators. The analogy is clear: Humans also, if we try to go it alone in life, are lost in many ways, are more vulnerable to disease and enemies! The importance of getting a loner back into some kind of flock cannot be underestimated, not only for the health of that person, but for the good of the greater society as well! We don't need to rehearse the common thread of mass shooters... the story often sounds the same: So and So was seen to be a loner, no close friends, often upset with family or society, and his or her feeble attempts at "friendship" on social media gave warning signs of violence.

So the saying is true that "no man is an island." In prison, solitary confinement is among the worst of punishments. Everyone needs some circle of friends. I can't help but mention social media; we know that Facebook's original intent was to connect people, and perhaps like other tools such as money, it can be used for good or for evil... We know the evils of invasion of privacy, the evils of connecting radicalized people, but we also have seen really good connections, reunions of long lost friends... though I believe that it is the ones that lead to fact to face to face or phone to phone interactions or that give the real fruit of friendship. I have a face book page, but do try to limit my time and my interactions on it; I may jump on there once every few weeks for a very limited amount of time. Think of all the small groups or circles that you like to be a part of; there are so many, all with different themes or foci. I feel privileged to be part of a group that centers around the Way of Jesus; there is friendship/fellowship AND the personal/individual tuning of hearts and minds, which is the root of a truly loving community.

Some unfortunate abuses aside, we know that the church has been a safe and nurturing place for decades, indeed centuries, in a large part due to what was called CIRCLES! Yes, a circle for quilt making, for missions, for Bible discussion, for prayer, for just women or just men. The UCC has often called them “affinity groups.” The conservative evangelical movement seems to like to use the term “small groups.” Some will simply say “home-groups.” And we all know that choirs are one of the mostly tightly knit groups in the church... Who wouldn't be? Meeting every week, with singing as prayer! Yes, even committee work can be enlivening, heartwarming, energizing, for anything done in the service of Jesus, will always have the component of loving God and loving neighbor. There is usually a bit of time set aside to share concerns and pray about them.

Most of us know the beauty of group work in the church, being part of a flock of like-minded and kind-hearted folks. We easily sing Blest Be the Tie that Binds, and do feel pain when we are called to part. I think the big challenge for most churches is the INVITE part... being brave to invite anyone who seems lost in any way: at loose ends, without compass, hurting physically or emotionally... and that is most everyone at one time or another!

So we continue to invite, not in “survival” mode, but in the genuine hope and faith that increasing community is always a good thing... to invite into, or to return to our “flock” because we are a community of love and humble service, a place that gives life.

The song that helped guide my thoughts this week is the song that Ken Medema sang the Sunday after Easter, to this church, Belleville church. But it really is a song to all churches, as we are seeing a societal and pandemic shift that has caused more isolation, self-reliance, self-centeredness, and putting #1 first, rather than celebrating community! Now I personally know a couple of churches who are closing or are on the brink of closing: My beloved friends at

the Methodist churches on Cape Ann., and my beloved friends and parishioners at the First Baptist in Needham where I worked.

So Ken's song and prayer is "Don't give up!" Keep loving this city, and Grace will surely be beside us to set people free. Keep this place as a beloved community, an inclusive community, one growing not only in numbers, but in depth of heart! So we continue to invite and please: not saying, "Hey, you got to meet our pastor" (that may have worked on me, but some people just run the other way!)... How about "You got to meet folks in our Thrift Shop," or "You got to hear our choir" or "Come to our upcoming Roots Concert to enjoy French Canadian culture!" To whatever group or event or worship gives you life, or makes you feel "this is my flock," invite someone! My favorite way to invite is to ask someone "Do you have a spiritual *community*?"

Ken's Song for Belleville, Sunday offering time, April 24, 2022

*Belleville you've worked so hard to do the right, to walk the path. Belleville, you work so hard to find the way to bring the grace. Day after day, week after week, year after year, you've seen the wrong, you've worked for the right, you've shed the tears. You've blessed the lonely, you've fed the hungry, you've run with the hopeless, brought joy to the destitute. Belleville, please don't give up. Now there is a work for you to do in this crazy, changing world. Oh Belleville, please don't give up! There's a path for you to walk that you've never walked before. Everything is changing, and sometimes it seems too fast. And you've got to wonder sometimes what will stay and what won't last. Belleville, you can never know your future, 'cause it's changing all the time. Nothing's ever certain. Of this I can be certain though: if you follow the path you see, Grace will be beside you as you work to set folks free! Oh Belleville, please don't give up! Keep moving on! Love this town. And they'll say of you in little ways, you turned their whole world upside down.*