

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost-Proper 16-Year A-The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland
8.27.23

A few months ago, I decided to try to take one day a week to engage in a digital sabbath: one day where I would set aside my computer and cell phone. So I signed up to receive a weekly email reminder every Monday morning to take the day off from technology. I am here to report that since receiving those weekly emails, I have a 100% failure rate. In other words, I have not practiced one day or even half a day of digital sabbath yet. But for seven of the last eight days, from last Saturday, August 19 until late Friday, August 25, I had an unplanned cell phone sabbath that started when, after completing the first leg of the return trip from Brazil, I had a few hours in the Montreal airport. Just enough time to get some breakfast and coffee, watch a few minutes of the Women's World Cup final, board the plane, and leave my cell phone behind, somewhere near Gate 5. Of course, by the time I realized that I didn't have my phone with me, I was all buckled up in seat 29E (yes, a middle seat, more bad luck) and the plane was beginning its taxi to the runway for the flight to Vancouver, BC.

That first day, I thought that unexpectedly not having a phone might be inspiring. I'd have that digital sabbath I've been hankering to try out, after all. But as the week unfolded, each day passing without an email saying, *We found it!*, I found myself less focused on the value of taking a digital sabbath and more focused on the necessity of having the right key or keys. Because what I've discovered this week is that without being able to receive access verification codes via texts or calls to my cell, I did not have access to pretty much everything that is in my name. My cell was the key to my kingdom and suddenly I lost the key, because no one could verify my identity or authenticate that I am who I say I am.

Identity, keys, and lost and found are front and center in this gospel, oddly enough, where Jesus asks his closest companions, *Who do you say is the Son of Man?* The disciples'—Jesus's closest companions, put Jesus in the mix with John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, and other prophets. But then Jesus asks more directly, *But who do you say that I am?* Simon Peter, who often doesn't get it—remember those three denials at the foot of the cross—this time does. It isn't that he gets the right answer on a test that Jesus is giving. It's a genuine question and Peter seems to suddenly see something that the others haven't quite experienced yet. Almost involuntarily, it seems, he blurts out, *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*

The key clicks, something is unlocked, because all of a sudden, the all-embracing vision of all that God cares about and all that God is up to in heaven and on earth are revealed. Simon Peter grasps who Jesus is—his authentic identity as the Living God—and suddenly this vision and affirmation that God's ways are stronger than all that tears at full wholeness for all is revealed. And it isn't just that Simon Peter gets who Jesus is in a new way, but immediately, Jesus opens up for Peter a vision of the kingdom of God that is full of blessing, full welcome of all of who Peter is and will be and says that Peter is a full partner in bringing this kingdom—this beloved community of heaven—into being. While I have been talking to lost and found departments, Jesus has been busy painting a vision of what it looks like to be lost and found, gospel-style. Peter recognized Jesus as the Living God and the next thing we know, he found out so much more about who he was in God.

Jesus refers to the church in this gospel—the first of only two times the word *church* is found in any of the gospels (both times in Matthew). And while the church isn't founded here, the foundation—rock—gets a nod. To get to particulars about how the church is to reveal and be the kingdom or community of heaven in this world, we have to wait a few more chapters, until Matthew 25: When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you as a stranger...or ill or in prison?...Every time you did this for the least of my sisters or brothers, you did it for me. Paul paints a different foundational vision of the church in Romans: one body, many parts, all gifted, all essential, all in Christ.

A year ago, the Presiding Bishop Michael Curry sat down with the Bishop of Oregon, Diana Akiyama, for an interview with Geoff Norcross of Oregon Public Broadcasting (whose father happens to be an Episcopal priest). One of the first questions that came up was about the decline in church attendance and affiliation across the U.S., but particularly in places like Oregon and Washington. Bishop Curry unpacked a survey that the Episcopal Church recently conducted. The survey, with the ambitious title, *Jesus in America*, confirmed what many other surveys about religion in America are showing: that confidence and involvement in the church have declined significantly in the past 10-15 years. When the survey asked about the church and how the church is speaking to what is on people's hearts and minds—particularly around issues of race, climate change and the environment, treatment of trans people, youth in particular, and a cluster of other real concerns, the approval rating hovered between 30% and slightly less than 50%. (That might actually be higher than you suspected.) But—and this is where it gets interesting—when the survey asked about Jesus, 84% of the American population said that Jesus of Nazareth is a spiritual person worth paying attention to. This percentage was fairly consistent cut across state lines, regional perspectives (i.e., even in the Pacific Northwest, Jesus gets respect), and the usual divides. Bishop Curry suggested that our work is to pay attention to that gap between Jesus and the church. The gospel indicates that has always been the work. To love the God we might not be able to see by loving the people and the earth we can see.

The bishops were also asked how they came to find themselves in the church. Bishop Curry said that in the 40's, before he was born, his mom (an Episcopalian) took his dad (a Baptist) to an Episcopal Church in Southern Ohio. And when it came time for communion and his mom went up to kneel alongside mostly white people, his dad wondered what would happen. And what happened is that the Common Cup was offered to her and she drank from it just like everyone else. Bishop Akiyama said that her grandparents were Buddhist. When her Japanese American grandfather was interred, he urged the family to become Christian as a way of proving they were good Americans. The way her family and others were received by the church, in the end, in the midst of a climate of fear and oppression, made all the difference. They stayed.

Their stories and the stories today are origin stories about keys, identity, and being lost and found (and maybe lost and then found again). Moses is lost and found and, like Peter, given a name, a fuller identity, that hints at all he will become in and with the Living God. His mother is lost in grief, until she finds herself, unexpectedly, reunited with him. Many women lost their children. The Hebrew people have not yet found their freedom. That is to come. Justice, compassion, liberation, kindness, reconciliation at the heart of being lost and found, the authenticating keys.