

November 2023

From the Bishop:



In the song *Amazing Grace* we sing, "I once was lost but now I'm found."

Because my job sometimes involves travel, there are times when I am wandering unfamiliar airports – trying to find my flight, trying to find edible food, trying to find a place to charge my phone, trying to find a place where there isn't a cacophony of sound and crowds of people. And sometimes at airports I also experience a feeling like a disconnection from my "self." Sometimes I am wandering the airport trying to find my "self." Strangely, there are moments at airports where I get this feeling as though I am unmoored from what connects me to other people. Honestly, I don't know if this is something only I experience or if others feel the same way.

There have been a slew of recent articles and social media posts written about how churches are dying and pastors are leaving and people are upset and no one goes to church anymore and so on. These posts are hard to read, and I wonder - is this a sign that we are feeling unmoored? That we are searching for something? Or maybe it is simply being lost.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells two parables – one about a lost sheep and one about a lost coin (Luke 15:1-10). You probably remember these parables – the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in search of the one. The woman turns over her entire house for the one coin that is missing from her purse. I think that traditionally we hear these parables as Jesus searching for the one who needs to hear the good news of Jesus for the very first time. But I think that is a misreading. The lost lamb was a part of the shepherd's flock. The lost coin was in the woman's purse. This story is for insiders. For those who know and yet have gotten lost.

This lostness might be of one's own volition. The sheep wanders from the prescribed pasture. But it can also be something that just happens. A coin cannot, on its own, get lost. We have all experienced the disruption of the pandemic, the cracks in our government, the warming of our climate causing suffering and death, and so much more. We notice changes in our churches and in our families and in our communities. Many of us have experienced personal troubles and tragedies. These all can lead to a sense of feeling adrift. And it can lead to fractures in our church community and our faith life.

However, the circumstance comes about – because of one's own actions or because of something that descends upon us – lostness occurs. And even when we know God's love and grace and comfort, even when we know that community is important, even when we are already part of God's community and church, we can still feel unmoored, lose our sense of belonging, our capacity to trust. We can get so lost that we don't know who we are or whose we are or where we belong anymore.

I don't know where you are at as you read this article today. Perhaps you are feeling snug with the other ninety-nine in the sheepfold of God. Perhaps you are a coin cozy with the other nine coins. But perhaps you are not. Perhaps you, too, are wondering and wandering. Perhaps you, too, are feeling disconnected from friends or family or your church community. Perhaps you, too, are wandering in Concourse C wondering how in the world you get to Concourse A. Perhaps you, too, are a sheep bleating for help or a coin under the couch cushions.

If this is you, the good news is that God is a searcher and a finder. The amazing news is that God is the shepherd hiking into the wilderness looking for you. The astounding news is that God is the housewife lighting her lamp and sweeping every corner in the house to find you. You are worth looking for. You are loved and desired. And when God finds you, there is rejoicing and laughter and a party! As Dan Erlander writes, "Love is God's action to bring us into abundant life – reconciled to God, to each other, and all creation!"

In the 2023-24 course offerings of the synod's LiVE Project there are many ways to be community together and the body of Christ together. There are ways to encourage and uplift one another. There are retreats, ongoing classes, and a year-long "Abide in the Word" Bible Study. (Learn more at <https://www.lutheransnw.org/ministries/the-live-project>) If you are feeling unmoored, lost, alone, adrift, I encourage you to first join in your community at your church and second, to join in the offerings in the wider synod. We are church together. We are journeying together. We get lost, and we get found, together.

Together we sing, "We once were lost but now we're found."

+ Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee / bishop@lutheransnw.org



From the VEEP

"Listen, listen, God is calling, *through the Word inviting, offering forgiveness, comfort, and joy.*" (ELW 513)

"So pay attention to how you **listen**, for to those who have, more will be given, and from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away." – Luke 8:18

A word search in Bible Gateway indicates that the word "listen", or a variation such as "listening," appears 396 times in the NRSV. In fact, Jesus often begins his parables by telling us to listen so that we might understand. As a veteran teacher, I know that pattern well. I can't count the number of times I have told my students to listen. I think many educators get in the habit of prefacing their instructions and lessons with some variation of "Listen!" It is not a bad practice. However, I also know the frustration of working with young people who "hearing ... do not listen, nor do they understand." (Matthew 13:13)

One of the four essential skills I am practicing in my Level 1 Coaching Training is listening actively. As it says in James 1:19, "Everyone should be quick to listen and slow to speak." We were reminded that listening requires being silent, engaged, fully present, curious, and interested. We also identified several challenges to active listening: mind chatter, discomfort with silence, multi-tasking, and thinking about what we are going to say next. In this context, we are practicing listening to those we are coaching, but these skills are also important when listening to God.

For me, one of the hardest parts of active listening is quieting the mind chatter and listening to/for the voice to which I am supposed to be paying attention. Every Sunday, prior to her sermon, our pastor prays for God to "silence in us now every voice but your own." This is a wonderful way to begin when actively listening for God's call to us. I also find that I am usually most focused on hearing God when I am in a time of intentional discernment. Right now, I am in discernment mode in many facets of my life. The congregation(s) of which I am a member and participant are discerning whether we are called to continue to walk together or to take separate paths; I am wondering what God may be calling me to when I retire from teaching; I am pondering how to best deploy my gifts of leadership in the greater church. However, I wonder what it might be like to sit in this listening posture all the time, and not just when I have a conundrum I want solved.

What would it be like to be attentive, to have my ear cocked toward God, as I go about my regular day-to-day activities. As I say, I'm good at listening for a response to a petition or prayer, but what if I were open to God addressing me first? What might happen if I practiced silencing my own voice, my doubts, my fears, my mind chatter? What would it be like to move through life curious about what the Spirit is up to all around me? Maybe the Spirit is speaking to me through a song on the radio, an advertisement on the television, a chance encounter with a friend, or a funny meme on the internet. Maybe there is a word of wisdom in a poem I read or a photograph a friend shared with me. As I continue practicing active listening in my coaching conversations, I think I'll try to expand that to my spiritual conversations, as well. After all, I don't imagine God is just waiting around for me to strike up a conversation – not after all those admonitions to listen!

Here's what the Synod Council and/or I have been up to in September:

- Synod Executive Committee met October 11 via Zoom. Among other agenda items, we appointed three new members to the Personnel Committee.
- Coaching: I participated weekly with my cohort learning about and practicing the four essential and four advanced coaching skills.

Kay Edgerton
Vice President of the NW Washington Synod
veep@lutheransnw.org