

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio, September 15, 2013, Pentecost 17, dedicated to my friend and teammate, Sal Lanciano, to my parents who have always loved me, to the 2013-2014 Gladden Scholars, to Madison Elisabeth Fulton on her baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!

“Lost and Found”

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Luke 15:1-10

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Have you ever been part on a team or a part of a group of people who looked from the outside and believed themselves in the inside to be really “cool?” And, by all indicators, they were really “cool.” Maybe they achieved or accomplished something that others had never done. Undefeated. Champions. Top sales people of the year – or many years. Top educators who have worked together to make their students and school tops in education. By all counts – both tangible and intangible - your team or group WAS really cool. They were really great at what they accomplished.

I was part of such a team when I was 15 years old. I was the starting shooting guard on our 9th grade basketball team, which finished the season as undefeated champions at 17-0. We were impenetrable! Never before and never again was I part of an undefeated team. In the 40 years since, the school has never had an undefeated basketball team. Through the winter of 1972-1973 we were riding high. We were the champions.

By the late summer of 1973, our starting power forward was dead. Sal Lanciano was dead - killed at 15 years old while playing a baseball game in a south Philadelphia summer league. He had

been hit by a fastball that struck him on the left temple. He seemed alright as he got up to play. But as he took the field at first base the next inning, Sal dropped dead on the field from a brain hemorrhage. I wasn't there. I was actually playing basketball that night with the other four guys when I heard the news. I was absolutely devastated. We all were. Our powerful rock was gone.

Sal was a big burly, tough Italian who grew up in south Philadelphia (think Rocky Balboa). Sal was our "Italian Stallion" - the toughest kid I knew growing up. He once grabbed my left hand after I hit 18 first half points and threatened that he would break both my hands if I didn't pass him the ball in the second half. I ended up with one more basket. Sal scored 14 in that second half with seven assists from me! My hands were spared. When we came in the locker room after the game he smiled and said, "You are smarter than you look."

What I was to discover at Sal's funeral was that I was not as smart as I looked. As our whole team sat together around his "40" jersey, I learned that Sal was a deeply faithful Roman Catholic. I had no clue. He was the president of his youth group, sang in his youth choir and was an altar boy as well. Every Friday night (when I didn't see him at high school basketball games), Sal was serving hot meals to homeless men in south Philadelphia. He was absolutely beloved in his south Philadelphia parish.

I never knew about this young man's faith. I was clueless. In all of our jocular banter, faith never came up as a topic. We were way too cool to talk about church. As I met the kids from Sal's Italian Catholic church, I saw in their eyes and heard in their stories the love they had for their friend - this funny, gentle, monster of young man they called "Salvador" - which means "Savior." As I got in the back seat of the station wagon with the other four starters from our undefeated Vikings team and headed home after Sal's burial, I made a promise to God that I would never again in my lifetime not truly know my friends - what made them tick, what faith they had in them, who they really were. We would never be a "cool" team again - with Salvador gone - our "cool" days were over.

In Jesus' time, the Pharisees were the (self- defined) really cool Jews. They followed the Torah and the Laws of Moses as perfectly as possible. They wore their faith on their sleeves, and on their heads and on their tongues. They knew all 613 laws of Moses and they followed them all. They moved and spoke as a team. They were the #1 Jews in First century Palestine. They called themselves - the **People of the Book**.

They had one flaw. The Pharisaic "Achilles Heel" (if you will) was this: they struggled to live their faith in their hearts. Jesus saw the flaw in the cool cats of Palestine. Jesus didn't grow up with the cool people (the People of the Book). Like Sal, Jesus grew up on the south side of Philadelphia. He grew up with those who were laughed at, mocked and left behind by the cool people. He grew up with the **People of the Land** -a title which was laughingly given them by the Pharisees. Read "losers" when you read "People of the Land." That is exactly what the Pharisees meant.

The People of the Land were poor peasants. They were mostly illiterate with few to no opportunities for education or good jobs. They were seen as unclean, uncouth, unreachable, unteachable and untouchable. They were - in the eyes of the Pharisees - "the lost children of Israel."

Jesus rejected temple Puritanism for common sense ethics. With Galilean farming communities living on the edge of starvation, taxed into absolute poverty by three levels of government - the temple in Jerusalem, Herodian overlords and the Romans - Jesus stepped in. With poverty, malnutrition, and unchecked infections leading to pandemics of blindness and leprosy, peasants were clinging to scarce promises of salvation from itinerant healers, redeemers, messiahs and rebels. They were already lost - seen so by the Pharisees and so felt in their own heart of hearts.

Into this political and religious powder keg walked the Jewish peasant Yeshua ha-Nazorean, barefoot, humble, outcast, but thoroughly unintimidated. **Jesus was a champion for his people - the People of the Land!** He lifted them to new heights through his presence and his passion. Long before he was our savior, he was their savior.

According to E.P. Sanders in *Jesus and Judaism*, “Jesus never focuses his prophetic restoration on the Jews. He does not focus on the nation of Israel. When collective terms are used they do not imply ‘all Israel.’ Rather, Jesus speaks of the ‘little flock,’ the ‘poor,’ and the ‘sinners.’ Jesus speaks to the people he grew up among. He rose from and addressed the people of the land.”

With a complete barrier between the **“People of the Book”** and the **“People of the Land,”** we enter the 15th chapter of Luke – which has often been called “the Gospel within the Gospel.” Here Jesus sets out to end the gap between “the lost and the found,” the winners and losers, the cool and the uncool.

Beginning with the parable of the lost sheep, and the lost coin, and ending with the Parable of the Prodigal Son, this chapter is good news all the way. Everything and everyone that was lost is found. The lost sheep is returned to the flock, the lost coin is recovered by its owner and when the lost son is returned to his father. The parties go on all night. Jesus shows that God’s talent for finding us is greater than our talent for getting lost and when we are found there is joy in heaven and on earth.

Good news can never be taken lightly, just as being found when you are completely lost can never be taken lightly. For any of us who have been in the darkness and fearful edges of the night, in depression, in a coma, in pain, in a far country where we have acknowledged our sin and the brokenness of our hurtful ways and actions, we know there is nothing better than being found, being saved and coming home.

To call Jesus the Savior should never be done lightly. As you know, when others called him savior he told them to be quiet. In the end, it was this title bestowed on him by those who loved him and those who hated him that cost him his life. The one, who led and leads others out of darkness and into light, knew the cost and the blessings of being a savior.

We need to remember that our savior stood with the uncool folks. I hope and pray that when you are lost, when you are the one who has wandered into the far field or been dropped and lost like the coin in the home, may you hear the voice of the one who

comes from behind, calls you by name, grabs you by the scruff of the neck, lifts you in the air, lays you across his shoulders and hauls you home. May your surprise in those scary moments turn to joy. May the relief you feel on the shoulders of the shepherd keep you knowing – now and forever – that you are never alone. You have been found. “Salvador” has you in his arms. In his loving embrace, you are home. Amen.

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