

Finding & Losing?
Jeremiah 20:7-13; Matt 10:24-39

I would like to tell you the story of a young man named Jared Eamons. Jared is the main character in a film entitled *Boy Erased*. The film centers on a Southern Baptist family from small town Arkansas. Jared's father, Marshall, serves as a preacher to the church the family attends, and his mother, Nancy, is a homemaker. One day, while Jared is home from college, a man calls the house and tells the Eamons their son is gay. Jared is immediately called in for questioning regarding his immoral behavior. In an all too familiar pattern, Jared's father demands he change his ways or leave the family home. In an effort to appease his religious parents, Jared agrees to go to conversion therapy.

Later, Nancy says she "knew in her bones this was wrong", but she did what she always did. She fell in line. Jared's experience at conversion therapy was everything a place which denies the beloved sacredness of God's children could be. It was full of name calling, ridicule, shaming and mockery. It used false piety and violence to invoke the name and work of God. Love in Action, the conversion therapy center Jared was sent to, used the debasing violence of this world to masquerade as the work of God.

After several weeks there, Jared experiences the continual violation of his privacy and personal space. He experiences the debasement of his and others' humanity. He is forced to watch another attendee being beaten and humiliated by both the staff and the attendee's own family. In an act of desperation, Jared steals his cellphone back from the office and calls his mother. Jared begs Nancy to come and get him. He begs her to save him: to put an end to his systematic suffering.

Nancy rushes over, but the staff will not let in her inside. She can just barely see her son through a small window in the door. Finally, another boy steps in, pushes one of the staff blocking Jared's way, and demands they let Jared go. This boy knew his family, the ones who had just literally beaten him with a bible in front of everyone else, would never come from him. The last act this boy does, before taking his own life, is save Jared.

Jared is released, and Nancy whisks him back to the hotel to regroup. She calls her husband and is summarily told to bring Jared back to the center. In that moment, Jesus' gospel comes alive in Nancy.

Jesus says, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Matt 10:39) A better translation, closer to the Greek, would read like this, "Those who seek their own life will destroy it, and those who destroy their life for my sake will find it."

Nancy risks life as she knows it, in order to love her son as herself.

She tells Jared she made a mistake doing what she always did. She made a mistake falling into line when he was sent away. She tells Jared she loves him, and it was now his father's turn to fall in line with her. Their actions had hurt Jared by cutting him off from his sense of self and his connection to the fact that he was a child of God. Nancy risks losing her husband to save her son. She risks destroying her marriage, her sense of safety and her very understanding of her life as a homemaker in order to do the right thing.

Nancy brings to light what her world does not want to see. She lives into Jesus' ministry of continually lifting up the lives of those deemed expendable. Time and time again, Jesus lifted up the lepers of society to tell them they were beloved children of God. Where the powers of this world cast out those who were different, Jesus brought them in. Where a father might cast out his son for being gay, Jesus would welcome him. Where no respect for another's human dignity exists, Jesus brings healing, love and support.

I am sure Nancy must have been afraid when she chose love over "things as they have always been." She must have been afraid to cause a rift between her husband and herself. Perhaps she took solace in Jesus' acknowledgement that following him would not always bring family harmony. Perhaps she took comfort in knowing that sometimes one must risk being at odds with one's family or one's community.

As a well-versed bible reader, I imagine she would take comfort in the knowledge that God's truth always finds the light of day. Jesus says, "For nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops." (Matt 10:26-27) When the thought of what she could lose by standing up for her son bubbled up, perhaps she heard Jesus urging her to not give into fear. Jesus said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul ... Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." (Matt 10:28-30)

This is an interesting statement. Sparrows were offered as a sacrifice in the Temple. Jesus is saying when you risk for the sake of God's kingdom, you will not be left alone by God. Every hair on your head will be accounted for. Jesus isn't telling his followers to offer themselves as sacrifice; he is telling them to be unafraid of the possibility. They are to be, like Nancy, willing to take the risk.

Of course, this doesn't mean the road is comfortable. Answering God's call to love our neighbor can require us to say and do things which might be alien to us. There will be uncomfortable moments when you stand up in order to make God's love tangible in the world. Such work, might even leave you feeling like Jeremiah from time to time.

Our reading in Jeremiah jumps in just as he is unleashing a lament for his struggles in standing up against the powers of this world. Jeremiah was a prophet speaking to the Jewish people trying

to help them avoid their eventual destruction by the Babylonians. His message was not widely welcomed.

In our reading this morning we hear Jeremiah telling God the impact his ministry has on him. Jeremiah says, “the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long”. (Jeremiah 20:8) He feels ostracized and mocked by those he is trying to help. Jeremiah is called by God to share with his people the ways in which they are not living into the ways of God. They are taken by the allure of worldly ways. The sort of things which lead to injustice: unquenchable wealth acquisition, possessive accumulation and false promises. He calls out leaders who reassure evil doers by announcing hope and security when the facts say otherwise. He names the failure of his community to miss a crucial opportunity to stop this behavior and avoid further suffering.

Jeremiah’s words were difficult for his community to accept. He was bringing to light what his people did not want to see. The status quo was familiar; it felt safe. Many ridiculed and mocked him. Jesus calls this “bringing the sword” rather than bringing the peace.

Now, before I get too far into the weeds here, let’s bring to the light what might be hidden in that statement. In the history of the Church, the notion of “bringing the sword” has been used to justify violence by invoking the name of God. The Crusades come to mind here, as does the notion of one group of people being endowed by God with the right to own another.

If we look deeply at the text, we find something different. The biblical Greek word for sword has two meanings. One is a small sword for slicing or thrusting. The other is a large knife used to breakdown an animal for consumption. It is a butcher knife whose work seems gruesome, yet it is the tool used to provide sustenance. This sword, then, isn’t the implement which brings death. It isn’t the gun or the spear used in the hunt. It is the tool used to turn a death into new life.

Turning death into life ... forward movement which can sometimes lead members of a family or community to be put at odds with one another ... Well, it just plain sounds scary!!

Yet, as a community, you have already done this more than once. This church went through the process of bringing women into a pulpit which I am sure was the providence of men for at least a century. This church opened its doors and its arms to the LGBTQ community when similar churches found that work too controversial.

You have lived into fearlessness. You did it this past Friday by coming together in support of Black Lives Matter and for calling for an end to systemic racism. As our world continues to call us out into the open to shine a light on the darkness of this world, you are equipped. Just bring along some (of what New Yorkers call) *chutzpah*, some of that practiced fearlessness with you. In doing so, you will find a new creation made more fully in the image of Jesus.