

All the Wrong Places, a sermon in response to Jeremiah 2:4-13 and Luke 14:1, 7-14 by Rev. Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, September 1, 2019.

“I was lookin' for love in all the wrong places.” ... I think you are all familiar with Johnny Lee’s hit song from 1980 called “Looking for Love.” It’s about a guy who *just can’t* find **love** – not because love isn’t *out there* – no, he can’t find love because he has let himself get distracted from looking where love actually lies. And so, he sings: “I was lookin' for love in all the wrong places. Lookin' for love in too many faces. Searchin' their eyes. Lookin' for traces.. of what I'm dreaming of...”
+++ Johnny Lee tells us he’s spent a **lifetime** looking in **bars**, telling sweet lies to the **wrong** people, trying to find his answers in complete **strangers**. ... And meeting with failure... time after time... +++ How **can** you... **ever**... truly find what you’re looking for if you always look in the wrong places?

I think this is what Jeremiah and Luke are cautioning us about in today’s readings... About what happens when we look for **God** in all the wrong places. +++ +++ After being led out of slavery in Egypt and through the wilderness for forty years, Israel had settled into the Promised Land generations ago. But Jeremiah complains that **from the beginning** God’s people had stopped looking for the Lord’s presence in their new home – and in their lives. Their ancestors “did not say, ‘Where is **the Lord** who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness,’” and now, **all these years** after entering the land, their **own** priests **still** do “not say, ‘Where is the Lord?’” Even worse, **Hebrew** Prophets were prophesying in the name of **Baal** instead of the God of Abraham:: – ... **Baal**, who was nothing more than an idol created by humans. +++ Now, Jeremiah warns, Israel has **earned** the wrath of God by looking for their **own** answers – their **own solutions** – ... instead of looking for God... As Jeremiah says, God’s own people are digging their own cracked cisterns and trying to fill them with their **OWN** water ... instead of accepting the **living** water of the Lord. +++ Israel was **looking for answers** in all the wrong places.

Our gospel reading gives a similar lesson. At first we might wonder why Jesus would take time to give a lesson on proper meal protocols. Why should **he** care where the guests sit at their host’s table – or, really, even who gets invited in the first place?
+++ Jesus talks about this because he understands the importance the **Pharisees** place on **their** class system +++ he knows how much they wanted to be honored **by other men**. A person’s importance in the *social hierarchy* meant everything to them and it was a measure of their honor and prestige to sit close to the head of the table... And it isn’t just the **guests**:: the **host himself** is also judged by whom he invites (and who actually **shows up**) at his dinners. It reinforced **his own** place in the hierarchy... So... he would only want to invite people who would be in a position to reciprocate by inviting **him** to **their** next dinner... and, perhaps, give him an honored seat near the head of **their** table... +++ **These are the leaders of the Jewish people – the bearers of God’s law** – and they are **looking for** validation through the eyes of **other people**. They are looking for ways to improve **their own** reputation in the community instead of ways to obey and follow the Lord. +++ Like the priests in Jeremiah, these Pharisees are looking for answers,... looking for meaning, ... looking for their identity ... **in all the wrong places**.

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It makes me wonder... Was it just the people of ancient Israel or the Pharisees of the Roman Empire that are guilty of this?
+++ In our **own** time, we look **all over the place** to find meaning for ourselves. If you just watch the news, you’ll see how we value people based on **our own** ideas of worthiness. Don’t we often judge each other according to social status – racial identity – gender identification – sexuality – country of origin – political parties – even what **college** someone went to (or if they went at all)? +++ In the United States, we’ve become more polarized than ever before:: we **demonize** anyone who supports the “wrong” political candidate – ...or disagrees with us on a social issue... In fact,... it’s gotten so bad,... we literally **judge each other based on what news channel someone watches**.... **THIS** athlete knelt during the national anthem.... **THAT** Christian prayed with a Muslim... **THIS** neighbor eats lunch at the restaurant we’re boycotting. +++ +++ **People like THAT are wrong. People like ME are right.** +++ Not only do we have to be right – but anyone who disagrees with us must be shown to be the immoral, degenerate, fools that they are! +++ We jockey for position, throwing our elbows and pushing in line to make sure **OUR** group wins. +++ Like the Pharisees, **WE** have to be at the head of the table – into the honored spot. +++ +++ **WHEN WE DO THAT...** – WHAT ARE WE **LOOKING FOR**? ... Is it **GOD**? +++ WHAT ARE WE **FINDING**? ... Is it truth?

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But Christ **really** turns the table on us – doesn’t he? Jesus doesn’t take sides about who should or shouldn’t be at the head of the table. He doesn’t tell **anyone** they **aren’t** worthy of being invited to the party – or that they don’t rank high enough to sit near the host. +++ **His problem is with this whole way of thinking**. Jesus’ argument is with how we stake out **our own ideas** of value... ideas of righteousness – ideas that happen to make **US** – and people like us – win... **in the world’s eyes**. +++ And so, he turns it upside down on us. **PUT YOURSELF AT THE FOOT OF THE TABLE**, he says! **INVITE SOCIAL OUTCASTS**, he says!. **YOUR REWARD IS IN HEAVEN** – not in the opinions of other people..... +++ +++ +++ It makes me wonder... +++ What would it be like if, as citizens of this nation, if we stopped trying to always be on the winning side and to prove that others are wrong?... – What if we **ALL** put others before ourselves? +++ Rather than being served, we’d all serve everyone

else no matter who they are. +++ Rather than judging and excluding people different from ourselves – what if we’d include them **ALL** in our social groups,... in our homes,... +++ in our churches,... +++ **and in our prayers**.... Not worrying about what’s in it for **us** here, in **this** world – but just thinking about how we are responding to the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives? +++ **I think that’s Jesus’ vision for the Kingdom of God.**

As Jeremiah tells us, when we truly look for God – THAT’S the kind of answer we find. When we live our lives **looking** for the Lord, we can’t help but **find** the Lord everywhere we turn. +++ Just **LOOKING** for God changes everything. The **habit** of... **looking**... **for God**... in our daily lives... as a regular **SPIRITUAL PRACTICE** opens us up to the Lord’s presence in our lives.

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Before attending seminary, I had the pleasure of serving as a youth leader for a long time and I’ve continued doing so here in East Hampton. One regular part of our weekly youth group meetings has been taking some time out to go around the circle and give each person a chance to identify where God showed up in their lives over the past week. At first, it is kind of hard for everyone to come up with something to say. They’d force themselves to think back through the week and decide what to talk about – perhaps they were kind to a stranger (or someone was kind to them), they might have seen a beautiful sunset, or they’d simply gave God credit for their close friendships and secure lives. They are usually able to relate **some** part of their week to God, and these were beautiful observations.... **BUT**, over time, I see how their thinking begins to evolve. Instead of just trying to **remember** things at that moment, sitting in the circle, they begin to say things like: – “Oh yes, when this happened I knew I had to share it at youth group.” And eventually, they begin to report – “I was **looking** for God to show up at school this week, and here’s what happened...” **These stories** often include their own good choices – showing compassion, sticking up for outcasts, sharing with those who had less. +++++ As they stop looking **backwards**, trying to **remember** after-the-fact how God showed up in their lives... they start looking **forwards, expecting** God to make an appearance each day. – They become more mindful moment-by-moment of the kind of lives they are living, of the choices they are making, of their relationships with friends and loved ones. +++ Without even realizing the change – these teenagers begin inviting the Holy Spirit into their lives. +++ +++ **When we look for the Holy Spirit, at work in our lives every day – instead of focusing on our own stature and success – instead of trying to get the seat of honor – When we look for the Holy Spirit, at work in our lives every day – we also find the blessings and guidance we need to live in the example of Christ.**

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So... I wonder... What are **YOU** looking for this morning? ... **WHERE** are you looking for it? In **this** life, it’s hard **NOT** to look for worldly accomplishments – and God **means** for you to enjoy the fruits of creation. There’s **nothing wrong** with finding success in your career, your home, and our town. +++ But where do you look for **validation – for meaning – for guidance** in your life? +++ If we seek it in honor – in the respect of our peers – in the race for the head of the table... we are **NOT** looking for God. +++ +++ ...Like the priests of Israel turning to Baal... – like the Pharisees competing for honored places at the table... – **we are not looking for God**. +++ Instead, we are digging our own cracked cistern and trying to fill it with our own muddy water instead of the **living** water of the Lord.

BUT – the Good News is.... when **you** live in active relationship with your life-giving God – when you are **compassionate** – when you work for **justice** – when you welcome **strangers** – when you **place** yourself at the **foot** of the table in the name of Christ... **THEN you drink** deeply of the Lord’s blessings. +++ When you look for the Lord in your life everyday – instead of looking for meaning and validation **IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES** – **you will always find** the blessings and guidance you need. +++ So – may you **“Look for Love”** in all the **RIGHT** places – by **expecting** God to show up in your life – by welcoming the guidance of the Holy Spirit – and by following the example of your Lord and Savior – Jesus Christ.

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In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.