

LIVING REPENTANCE

Pentecost 17 – Cycle C: 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

We received a notice in the mail this week from the Lost and Found Theatre company in Kitchener. They are celebrating their tenth season, their publicity states; but those of us with long memories remember that several of the actors began in 1990 as Theatre and Company, directed by Stuart Scadron-Wattles. Theatre and Company was a real local success story, if ever there was one.

Their first theatre space was in an undeveloped corner of the King Centre's Water Street lobby, the whole building now completely inhabited by Manulife Financial. Right from the beginning, Theatre and Company made connections with the local high schools and would bring in theatre arts classes for performances and workshops. Later, several high school theatre students would go each year to Saturday acting classes, funded through grants provided by Theatre and Company's board of directors. Our son, Graham, was one who benefitted from this mentoring program.

After a few years in the King Centre, the company's audience and board of directors started contributing to a fund and applying for grants to build their own theatre in part of the old Goudies store at the corner of King and Queen Streets in Kitchener. While the fundraising and eventually the erection of the new theatre was taking place, the City of Kitchener transformed part of Kitchener's Market Square into a temporary theatre. Finally, in 2002, Theatre and Company, with a lot of help from the larger community, opened the King Street Theatre, the building later known as the Conrad Centre.

Theatre and Company had developed its audience by being a repertory company. The audience became familiar with the actors and their versatility at playing many contrasting roles each season. Several plays on their annual playbill were written by Canadians. All the plays, it seems to me, had a religious subtext, some plays more obvious than others in this respect.

As I recall, Theatre and Company had two full seasons in their new premises with ever-growing audiences. And then, the board in consultation with the artistic director, changed course. The repertory company, with one or two exceptions, was shown the door, and the playbill became more wide-ranging; no more religious subtext. New actors, typically from Stage West in Mississauga, were brought in to replace the local actors. What had been a semi-professional theatre was now professional; the King Street Theatre was now a union house. Slowly but inevitably, costs increased and audience numbers decreased as the new vision failed to keep the old audience and win over a new one. The original actors, wondering what had just happened and now without an annual salary, scrambled to pick up work – some more successfully than others. In the fall of 2004, the remnant of the former Theatre and Company opened in the chapel of First United Church, Waterloo, with local playwright Gary Kirkham's play *Radio Leacock*. There was standing room only in this tiny space; the three performances were sold out: this phoenix out of the ashes called itself Lost and Found.

The remnant of the original Theatre and Company has soldiered on valiantly for nine years: no longer is anyone drawing a salary. They really aren't viable financially, but somehow they continue for the sake of their audience and their art.

The original Theatre and Company grew out of a house church which met, I believe, in Kitchener. The closeness of the actors and director and the religious content in their plays was no accident: they were all people of faith who saw their work, in broad terms, as mission and ministry. And the reason I'm telling you their story this morning is that the name of the 2004 repertory company, Lost and Found, is actually a faith statement – one which can be related easily to the two parables in this morning's Gospel and, of course, to the experience of St. Paul, referred to in this morning's Second Reading.

Jesus tells us at the end of the two parables that they are about sin and repentance; that the lost sheep and the lost coin signify those who are lost in sin. The grace in the stories, the new theology Jesus teaches through the parables, is that God seeks those who are lost. Remember Luke's prologue to the passage: "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"

I don't know how many times in my years of ministry I have taken flak for the regular use of our prayers of confession at Sunday worship, but the number is not small. The comments I typically receive are, "Pastor, sin is such a downer. When I come to church I want to be built up, not reminded of all my faults." Or sometimes the comment takes the form of a question, "Why must we confess our sins every week? I'm a good person. I try to live according to the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, and be kind to people. I come to church almost every week. Are we really so bad that we have to focus on our sin all the time? It's no wonder attendance is falling in our churches with such a negative message."

I do listen to these comments, and try to do as we have done today and reserve our use of confession for Sundays when the readings focus on living the repentant life, times in our public or national life when we need to confess our shortcomings, and our penitential seasons of Advent and Lent. I agree that so much that happens to us either individually or corporately each week, amounts to struggle, and we need to hear words of hope and promise when we gather for worship on Sunday; that the first words out of our mouths should not necessarily reinforce what we already feel. The difficulty is, however, that when we cut ourselves off from the bad news, we also cut ourselves off from the good news.

Sin is the condition into which we are born – for better or for worse. Were this not the case, there would have been no need of Jesus and his saving work. The gospel would be redundant. None of us would struggle. Christian community is one of the few places we gather where we can be honest about such things. Sin catches us all, and hurts us all. Sin has power in our lives and has the capacity to destroy life. We may not be bad people, as my parishioner reminded me; but neither are we wholly good. Luther expressed it most succinctly in writing that we are sinner-saints: sinners, because like it or not, we are part of fallen humanity; saints because God never gives up on us, sent his Beloved One to teach us and show us unbounded love; saved us from ourselves with that same powerful love.

If I had been part of the original Theatre and Company, I might have been tempted to name the sin and the sinners that had caused my sudden unemployment. But such assessments are too easy and quickly place us in a position of judgment over others – something Jesus cautioned against over and over again. Without question, because sin is endemic to the human condition, sin is always part of our experience. But we don't have to give it power over us. As those who have answered Jesus' call to discipleship, as those who hear in him words of life, we know that sin does not have near the power of love; that sin has absolutely no capacity to heal and to save; that sin's properties are anything but resurrection and new life.

And so, we are lost and found – both at the same time. We know who we are by virtue of our fallen humanity, but we also know whose we are through the saving, redeeming love of the Good Shepherd who seeks us and will not rest until we are found. And because we are both lost and found, lost to sin and found by grace, we understand why we need Jesus so very much. He gives us those words of hope and promise we desperately need to hear, and embodies them. He becomes the Good Shepherd. He becomes the woman who searches and searches until she finds the lost coin. He is the father who welcomes home the Prodigal from a season of self-indulgence and dissolute living.

Living repentance is acknowledging that we are both lost and found. Living repentance is living among people who are able to be honest about being both good and bad. Living repentance is making a place in our lives for Jesus' saving ways.