

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
October 9, 2022
Luke 15:1-10

Banned Books Part 5: Looking For Alaska

Thomas Morton, an Englishman who traveled to Plymouth Colony in 1622, wasted no time in clashing with his strait-laced Pilgrim neighbors. Dubbed the "Lord of Misrule" by Plymouth Colony Governor William Bradford, Morton and his followers affixed antlers to the top of an 80-foot maypole, around which they hosted a festival with dancing and drinking that was no doubt sinful by Puritan standards.

After being banished from the colonies multiple times and traveling back to England, Morton wrote the "New English Canaan" about his escapades across the pond, a book that offered a scathing critique of the Pilgrims and is widely considered to be the first banned book in America.

While it's been nearly four centuries since Morton's book was banned, the urge to censor has not disappeared. In 2021, nearly 1,600 individual books were challenged or removed in libraries and schools, the highest number since the ALA started tracking bans three decades ago.

Now I said at the beginning of this series: throughout history people have sought to censor stories that didn't align with their worldview – and religious people have been a chief instigator of that. And yet, Jesus' primary mode of teaching was telling stories, and his stories sought to expand people's minds and deepen their insights. Jesus knew that stories help us to make sense of our lives and our world. Stories then, and stories now are how we communicate with others; they help us to process what has or is happening; they help to shape us; and they help us understand the meaning of life, death, and grief that we all experience. And it is these latter subjects: life, death and grief, that our final book is about.

Looking for Alaska tells the story of Miles Halter and his experiences at an Alabama boarding school. Before leaving for school, Miles narrates his love for famous last words, the most important being François Rabelais' last words: "I go

to seek a Great Perhaps.” Such words become the foundation and motivation for Miles’ adventures at boarding school as he searches for his purpose in life.

While at school, Miles meets Chip, Takumi, and Alaska, whom he follows on rule-breaking adventures, including smoking cigarettes and hiding bottles of wine in the woods, such scenes being the reason for the book being banned. Much of the first half of the book centers on the students’ antics outside of class and Miles’ growing crush on Alaska, despite the fact that she has a boyfriend. But one night after drinking too much, Alaska tragically dies in a car accident. Her death serves as the turning point and the latter half of the novel consists of Miles and his friend trying to solve the mystery of whether Alaska’s death was a suicide. This takes place against the backdrop of their religion class in which they are prompted to ponder the mystery of Alaska’s death while searching for the meaning of life. Dr. Hyde, their religion teacher, provides students with their final term paper prompt: How will we ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?

It’s a grim question that consumes the second half of the novel, but it’s one all of us have probably asked at some point or another. Because, as Dr. Hyde said, “. . . everybody who has ever lost their way in life has felt the nagging insistence of that question. At some point we all look up and realize we are lost in a maze . . .”

Have you ever been lost? Perhaps you’ve broken down on the highway and can’t find a way to get help. Perhaps you’ve been out on a walk, but the path that was supposed to be there just wasn’t and you couldn’t find your way back. Or perhaps some of you have been lost more seriously, in a place where the weather might have changed, where you might never have been found or where you seriously thought this might be it. I’m sure you can remember or imagine that sense of what it feels like to be lost.

And of course there are plenty more kinds of human experience where that same sense of fear and disorientation and despair – that sense of helplessness – can grip us. Some of us get lost when illness descends on our lives. Some of us get lost when death comes for someone we love. Some of us get lost when our marriages fail. Some of us get lost when our children break our hearts. Some of us get lost in the throes of addiction, or anxiety, or infidelity, or unforgiveness, or hatred, or bitterness.

And some of us get lost very close to home — within the very walls of the Church. We get lost when prayer turns to dust in our mouths, or when the Scriptures we once loved lie dead on the page.

In the first parable Jesus tells, a shepherd leaves his flock of ninety-nine to look for a single lamb that is lost. He searches until he finds it, and when he does, he carries that one lamb home on his shoulders, invites his friends and neighbors over, and throws a party to celebrate.

In the second parable, a woman loses one of her ten silver coins. Immediately, she lights a lamp and sweeps her entire house, looking carefully for the coin until she finds it. Then, like the shepherd, she calls together her friends and neighbors and asks them to celebrate the recovery of the coin: “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.”

Like the lost sheep and the lost coin we haven’t chosen to be lost. We are simply human, and we find ourselves sometimes in the wilderness. This is not, I think, an experience for the exceptional few, but for all of us. In the novel Looking For Alaska, Alaska was lost, and so were her friends without her.

We get lost. We get so miserably lost that the shepherd has to wander through the craggy wilderness to find us. We get so wholly lost that the housewife has to light her lamp, pick up her broom, and sweep out every nook and cranny of her house to discover what’s become of us.

But can we pause for a moment and take in how astonishing this is? That God searches, persists, and lingers for us? God wanders over hills and valleys looking for us, the lost lamb. God turns the house upside down looking for us the lost coin. And when at last we are found, God invites the whole neighborhood over, shares the happy news of recovery, and throws a party to end all parties?

Can we pause for a moment and take in how astonishing this is?

Friends, when we find ourselves lost, in whatever way that is, the promise of scripture is that God will find us. It doesn’t matter how stupid we’ve been, or how much we’ve suffered, or how hard it is to find us, God will be there. And not only that, but God is *especially* close to us when we are lost. We are not abandoned or lost to God at all, but God is with us.

The message today is not a demand, not a burden, not an exhortation, but a word of grace to all of us who find ourselves lost. God, it turns out, comes looking for

us, whether or not we are able even to move. The woman didn't wait for the coin to find her – she swept the room like a compulsive cleaner. The shepherd didn't wait for the sheep to come back – he even risked losing the other sheep to find the *one*. Likewise, we don't need to find ourselves before we can come home – because God will find us first.

You know, most of us spend much of our lives trying to avoid those experiences of being lost. But if these parables are true then these might just be the times when God is particularly close and when we might grow the most. If that's so then perhaps the moments of lostness are moments to be treasured and to be lived through in the hope that we will grow in love and grace.

Barbara Brown Taylor, has said this;

“Popular religion focuses so hard on spiritual success that most of us do not know the first thing about the spiritual fruits of failure. When we fall ill, lose our jobs, wreck our marriages, or alienate our children, most of us are left alone to pick up the pieces. Even those of us who are ministered to by brave friends can find it hard to shake the shame of getting lost in our lives. And yet if someone asked us to pinpoint the times in our lives that changed us for the better, a lot of those times would be wilderness times.”

I find those words speak to something in me. There can be a kind of shame of being lost in life, in whatever way we find ourselves lost. There are things we don't speak about often to one another, things we hide -- behind bright faces and smiles. But we have all been there. So perhaps we need to hear today the good news offered and preached by these parables – that it is the lost who are found even when they are helpless. It is God who searches and hunts and never lets go to find us and hold us and bring us home. God reaches out to join us in the places where our fears gather and in the labyrinth of endless suffering.

So if you have ever been lost, if you are feeling lost right now, or if you fear being lost in the future, then know that God will sweep every room to find you and climb every mountain. And God will rejoice with you when you are found⁵⁰⁸.

Amen.

