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Calgary AB
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Read: Exodus 20:1-17 Psalm 19 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

“GOD KNOWS THE WAY TO LIFE”

“Lost” is the name of a popular TV program that is now in its 5th season. Perhaps it is successful for a very good reason. I confess now that I’ve never seen an episode – any fans here?

Well, curious about the buzz around it I found this synopsis on the Web:

After Oceanic Air Flight 815 tore apart in mid-air and crashed on a Pacific island, its survivors were forced to find inner strength they never knew they had in order to survive. But they discover that the island holds many secrets, including the intense howls of a mysterious creature stalking the jungle a polar bear, a marooned and crazy French woman, a mystical boar, a mysterious group known only as "The Others," a ship called The Black Rock and... several mysterious hatches.

As the days slowly turn into weeks, the survivors dig deeper in the many secrets of the island and then six of them manage to find their way home -- but we soon learn that was the worst thing that could have happened!

I think you get the idea that the focus of the show is on survival and getting off the island, getting “un-lost”. Too many feel lost and need a way.

I recently had an experience getting lost. It involved trying to get to Symons Valley United Church for the Emerging Spirit, Living the Hope event last month. I knew where it was, I had been there before. I thought I knew a faster way. Instead of across town to the Deerfoot, then North to Beddington Drive, we would head North on the Stoney Trail, to the new Sarcee interchange, then North to 144 Ave (the old Burma Road) to Symons Valley Road and South to Kincora – Home Free! Maybe five or even ten minutes early.

I was pretty sure it would work but I checked it on the map because we had been blocked getting through to 144 Ave a few years before. No problem, the map said. A clear white line connected Sarcee Trail and 144 Ave. We WOULD have made it on time IF the map and the roads agreed. It seems there is no connection between Sarcee Trail and 144 Ave. Sarcee is blocked off at 128 Ave. And there is no connection between Shagannapi Trail and 144 Ave. we found out, even though we could SEE the Kincora district only a few blocks away, but there was no access to it.

(Waving map) WE TRUST THESE THINGS!

All that being said, it was a richly symbolic time. An old minister trying to find an Emerging Church event, in an emerging church congregation, in an emerging neighbourhood, on an emerging road system, and hitting dead ends not shown on an out-of-date map! It was also after nightfall. How many ways can you be in the dark at one time? Are you getting the picture? The map, for the most part, worked. It's just easier to blame the map than to admit I got lost. Too many today feel lost and need a way.

The source of light and hope in this story is that we did get to the church, ironically and perhaps prophetically, by retracing the traditional route down Country Hills Boulevard to Beddington Drive.

For us at Scarboro to become a source of light and hope for the emerging church will be akin to being lost in many ways at once. Having a good, current map is essential but it was not the map by itself that got me where I needed to go. The map helped but it was a combination of determination and direction on my part and the part of so many others. I did not create the event we were hoping to attend. I did not build the car or the roads. Others have determined that events like the one that six of us here attended are a necessary and an appropriate response to the decline in membership in the United Church. They help us to find ways to connect with the many who feel lost and need a way - and we are a community with a way.

Emerging Spirit itself provides a map but it doesn't give us a destination or road.

The challenge is to take what has been learned through their research and apply it with determination and a willingness to risk a few dead ends, to risk having some of the frustration and exasperation those dead ends bring. Eventually we will find what works for us in our context, with our history and values and traditions. Journeying in faith along the way

means being true to our own story and true to our own soul -- as a people and as individuals.

Inviting and welcoming “un-churched seekers” (as they are called) in the 30 – 45 age group doesn’t mean giving up traditions and values that are truly important to us, just as we don’t dig up old roads or leave them off the map just because we have new ones. We may decide not to travel the old roads as much, or use them only for specific destinations or purposes – knowing the old roads can be very useful when the new ones are blocked or jammed.

Perhaps this is why we are looking at how we greet and welcome people. This is an area we have made changes in the past. Scarborough doesn’t have an enduring tradition of welcoming in a rigidly specific way. A church I served in the 80’s had an enduring, rigid tradition of ushering. One fellow who had moved away in his teens and come back for a visit in his middle age, some thirty years later, was convinced the church hadn’t changed in that time – the same men were still ushering! And in the same way! They would always hand you a bulletin, give you a warm smile, then turn and walk down the aisle expecting you to follow to your seat. On more than one occasion I saw them lead a new person up the aisle to a front seat and turn to motion them into the pew only to find the individual had ducked into a pew at the back!

More recently, and to their credit I believe, when people come to worship there, one of the first things they see off to one side of the entryway is a clearly and visibly labeled information counter with someone there to answer questions, give church maps and explain directions to important places like the Nursery and Sunday School, not to mention the washrooms. There are other possibilities. The struggle is to find what will work for us in our time and place.

All this brings us to the Ten Commandments – which is what I have really been talking about all this time. But then you knew that, right?

Conservatives criticize liberal churches saying they prefer to treat the Commandments as ten suggestions or ten guidelines. But posting them on courthouse lawns or in school hallways will not cure crime and make society Christian.

It is important to remember these Ten Words are a road map not the road, a road map and not the journey, a road map, not the destination. They have a way of providing illumination when we need it. They give us light to show us where to step in a dark world. They provide direction to keep us from getting lost and to help us get back home when

we do. They provide a way to travel on our journey but they can't do the travelling for us. They provide a sense of protection from the dangerous curves life can throw at us, a guardrail, if you will, to keep us from running off the road.

They are not our salvation – yet they can help us have faith in the road as we travel in the light, direction and protection they give.

Like with so much of the teaching in the Bible, and like with any map, it is up to us to both interpret and apply what we read because the map is not the road. Interpretation involves determining when we have hit a dead end and when it is time to find another route. The teachings must be applied if our journey is to be a faithful one. Applied faithfully, these teachings can guide us through bad economic times and good, help us to build communities of peace and non-violence, enable us to work well in whatever we choose to do for a living, make it easier to get along at home.

In both interpretation and application determination and community come into play again. How many have memorized the Criminal Code of Canada? How many have managed to stay out of jail most of your life? How many understand the principles behind the Criminal Code, as opposed to just being too clever to get caught? How many have been too clever? (Don't answer that!)

The fact is, our homes, schools and communities teach us enough about the laws of the country that most of us never have to read the books of laws – we know the principles and ideas well enough to generalize that knowledge to most situations and apply them successfully.

There are several principles behind the Ten Commandments which help us to be faithful in our journey. The first four emphasize our relationship with God, the last six emphasize how to get along in community.

Jesus' great commandment states these two principles more positively – love God with all your heart, soul and strength and your neighbour as yourself. Augustine was even more blunt, "Love and do as you please."

The commandments we are given from God are about relationship, not about sacrifice, yet by Jesus' day the emphasis had shifted and Temple worship was focused on sacrifice. Worship was about appeasing an angry God, not about developing a relationship with a loving one, about avoiding punishment, not about loving others.

Because the Ten Commandments are stated negatively they are indirectly sacrificial. We are to sacrifice the false idols we worship, sacrifice our lust for revenge and for others, sacrifice the easy dodge of lying our way out of trouble, sacrifice the disrespectful way we treat our partners, sacrifice our craving to have the same possessions as others and so on. Again, Jesus puts it more positively – love God, love others, love yourself. So simple yet so difficult.

The Commandments are a map of ways to feed our souls as individuals and as a community. Parker Palmer helps us see what our souls want. Part of our faith journey is to get reconnected to our own souls. In the reading from Day 15 in “40–Day Journey with Parker Palmer” (H.F. French (ed.), Augsburg Books, Minneapolis, 2008, p. 48) he says this, and I hope you can hear the echo of the commandments in what he writes:

- The soul wants to keep us rooted in the ground of our own being, resisting the tendency of other faculties, like the intellect and the ego, to uproot us from who we are.
- The soul wants to keep us connected to the community in which we find life, for it understands that relationships are necessary if we are to thrive.
- The soul wants to tell us the truth about ourselves, our world, and the relation between the two, whether that truth is easy or hard to hear.
- The soul wants to give us life and wants us to pass that gift along, to become life–givers in a world that deals too much death.

Then he adds:

All of us arrive on earth with souls in perfect form. But from the moment of birth onward, the soul or true self is assailed by deforming forces from without and within: by racism, sexism, economic injustice, and other social cancers; by jealousy, resentment, self–doubt, fear, and other demons of the inner life.

God knows. God knows we all need food for our souls and God has given us a map, a way of discerning in and through the company of others, what is good, true and beautiful. It will help us discern what will sustain us and enable us to determine for ourselves, as individuals and as a community, what is the right direction for us as we journey together with God.

In this quiet time and beyond you may wish to reflect on these questions:

- In what way are you feeling lost?
- What provides your road map for life? Where will it take you? How is it working for you?
- What, if anything, lifts your head out of the mud of day to day existence to see the light, peace and hope so freely given?
- How often have you found your way through difficult times because of the teachings we have been given?

Thanks be to God. Amen