

Lonely Agnes of Prospect

Luke 15:1-10

Preached by Rev. Phyllis A. Norman September 16, 2007

Prospect Congregational Church, PCC

Jesus didn't preach-Jesus told stories, and in the telling he was able to get the point across in a masterful way. Jesus' story was his sermon. He told the stories of the lost sheep and the missing coin to the crowds of people surrounding him, and they went home and thought about them. They figured it out and applied it to their lives. This morning I do the same-the sermon is a story. When it is finished you will go home, figure it out, and apply it to your lives. Our story is about the lonely lady of Prospect. I have taken Jesus' two stories and an idea from Dr. Richard Jenson (past professor of homiletics, Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago), and adapted it to our town and our lives:

Once upon a time there was a family, a mother, father, and their two children. They lived in New York City. Living in that city was a big rat-race, filled with stress, traffic jams, congested streets, no parking, no time, no close friends-no one knew anyone. This family dreamed of one day living in a small town of maybe 10,000 people or so. This was their dream, their vision, their preoccupation, to find jobs in some small town where life moved at a slower pace. They yearned to relax and be human and have time to enjoy one another.

A real estate agent helped them realize their dream. Mom and Dad each found a job in Prospect, and pretty soon they found a house and moved to the lovely little town. They loved the fact they could walk to the park for lunch. They liked the playground where their children could play, and the many ball fields to play their sports. They liked the fact that people knew one another, even their names. The best part of all was the mayor who loved the town so much he held the position longer than any other mayor in Connecticut.

Dad got up every morning and jogged in the park. He enjoyed the beauty of the lawn and trees, and the path through the wooded area. He loved everything about the park and noticed everything about it, including an unusual woman who always seemed to be there-this elderly lady sat, or stood or walked in some part of the park. At first dad didn't pay too much attention to this lonely person. Probably a coincidence, he thought to himself, but he began to pay closer attention. He noticed she was very ordinary looking: average height, average hair color, average build, nothing extraordinary about her. But her eyes were sad, big gray sad eyes.

The extraordinary thing about this sad lady was she always seemed to be in the park, standing, looking out at Rt. 69. She would look down Waterbury Road, and then up Waterbury Road. Dad was puzzled and asked himself, "Who is this woman? What is she doing here every day?" One day while Dad was jogging his eyes met the woman's eyes and they locked in place. There was a gaze within them as if she was looking for someone or something. His curiosity got the best of him one day at work. He asked another employee who had grown up in Prospect, "Who is that woman?" The employee answered, "Oh, you mean the lonely lady of Prospect, Agnes. I know all about her. Pull up a chair and I'll tell you all about Agnes.

"As I said, her name is Agnes. She has spent a lot of time in the park in recent years.

She and her husband Tom moved to Prospect years ago. They had little money but Tom was ambitious, and he bought a store on one end of town, and then another store at the other end of town. He was about as successful a businessman as the town of Prospect has ever seen. Good family. Good wife. Wonderful three children. They did well, and everyone respected them.

"Sadly, Tom was stricken with cancer. He was much too young. Such a sad day -- I remember it well, the day he died. Agnes, his wife, did not have much time to grieve -- she had to learn to run the businesses, and she did. She was good at it. As good as Tom.

"The years passed and Agnes turned 65 -- she retired and turned the businesses over to 2 of their children Sam and Sabrina. Their third child Silas, the youngest, had died in an accident in Colorado years before, so Sam and Sabrina inherited the 2 businesses.

"The kids did not have the business sense Agnes did, so she helped them out--in fact, they could not have run those businesses if it had not been for Agnes. After a while, though, Sam and Sabrina didn't want their mother around any more. It became a family feud if you get my drift. Agnes got a letter from Colorado one day and it got her all worked up. She wouldn't tell anyone about the contents of the letter, only that she needed to get out to Colorado right away. She needed a plane ticket. Finally Sam and Sabrina bought their mother a ticket to fly to Colorado.

"Agnes flew the next day. And the mysterious letter? Silas wasn't dead at all. He had been in prison on several counts of armed robbery. He was too ashamed to tell his mother so he concocted the story that he had been killed in an accident. And now, for reasons we will never know, Silas decided to write his mother and tell her he was alive. It would have been better for Agnes if Silas had left things alone and the family had continued to believe he was dead. No one wants a convict in the family. Many people in Prospect would like to wring Silas' neck for the stunt he pulled. Bad enough he left home and did what he did. Let him pay for it. But when he had a friend write his mother saying he was dead, that was the last straw. No use making poor Agnes suffer for it. But he did it anyway. Now he wants to reconcile. I remember that day. Agnes went out there. Agnes flew to Colorado.

"From all the rumors and gossip flying around Prospect I pieced together the scenario that played out in Colorado prison: Agnes was led down a long corridor and into a waiting room. The guard took Agnes into a small room off the waiting room. He told her to wait there. Her son would be there shortly. She waited for what seemed like an eternity -- it had been ten years since Agnes had last seen Silas; would she recognize him? Then she heard his long-forgotten footsteps. Her heart pounded. She looked up and there he was. They stood, silent, their eyes looking each other over. She held him tightly and she cried, and she cried, and she cried. Finally, Silas cried too. There they stood, mother and son, sobbing in one another's arms.

"Soon they sat and talked. They got reacquainted. And Agnes stayed in Colorado for a while. She visited the prison every day, and every year after that she flew back out to Colorado to visit Silas. Then the rumor got around Prospect that Silas was getting out on parole any time now. Agnes had promised Silas he could live with her when he got out, and he would always be a partner in the family businesses. H-m-m-m-well-

"Well, Agnes was about the only one in Prospect excited about Silas coming home. People around here weren't too keen on the idea. Silas might have been alive, but Silas was a crook. A good-for-nothing crook that told his mother he was dead. We wondered what to say to Agnes: 'Gee, we're glad your son is alive and in prison?' What do you say? People in Prospect said nothing.

"Now Sam and Sabrina-they weren't that quiet. They had had enough. When Agnes told them Silas wanted to come home, to disgrace them all, when she told them Silas would be a part of the family business, they cut their mother off at the knees. No way! It would not work, a crook in the family business. But Agnes did not see it that way. Silas was her son, too, just like Sam and Sabrina were her children. He had a right to be back in the family. That was the heart of the family feud.

"Agnes' children took her to court. A lawyer drew up papers that ruled Silas out of the business. Sam and Sabrina informed their mother she no longer had any claim to the family business-it was all theirs and they could do what they wanted. Agnes was barred from the stores. In fact, Sam and Sabrina took out a restraining order on Agnes so she could not come into their stores ever again and pester them about Silas.

"I thought that was really unkind. Agnes had given them the stores-she helped them all those years to learn the business well. I think they went too far, and many townspeople felt the way I did. Agnes was no longer invited to their homes, not even for Christmas and Easter. She was not allowed to see her grandchildren whom she loved dearly. But the kids sneak over to the park every chance they get to see their grandma-they love her. That's the way grandkids always are.

"Tom, you're fairly new to Prospect and now you know why Agnes wanders alone in the park. The lonely woman of Prospect, that's what they call her. She's out there right now, watching and waiting. She looks down the road-she's waiting for Silas to come home. Rumor has it he has been paroled and due home any day now. And Agnes is out there waiting, watching. But she also has her eye on the business at the north end of town, and the one on the south end. She watches and waits for Sam and Sabrina to have a change of heart."

Tom's fellow employee paused. He scratched his head and said, "You know, I think Agnes would do with Sam and Sabrina just like she did when she first saw Silas in prison-she would burst into tears of joy and happiness. And if she sees him coming up Waterbury Road she will again burst into happiness. She knows that Silas needs to come home, home to his family. Home to his future. And if Sam and Sabrina change their hearts and attitudes towards their brother, Agnes would be so happy. When they come to their senses Agnes is going to throw her arms around them and love them joyfully. You know, that's just the way Agnes was in the past. That's just the way Agnes is now. That's the way she will be tomorrow. That's just the way she is."