

Rejoice with Me

Luke 15: 1-10

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Here's a story I heard on VPR yesterday. It wasn't the first time I've heard it, either, but like so many Biblical stories, it is a powerful one that will be probably be told for generations to come. It's a story of people rejoicing with one another, not only for a moment, but for years.

On that fateful September 11th of 2001, as all adults will remember well, U.S. airspace was closed off to all flights immediately after the Twin Towers crashed. Hundreds of mid-air flights could not cross the border, and were rerouted to land elsewhere. In Gander, a town of 10,000 in Newfoundland, Canada, 38 wide-bodied planes arrived with a total of about 7000 frightened passengers who needed food and shelter. About 800 of them were bussed to an even tinier village named Lewisporte where the whole town turned out to take care of them. Without hesitating, the people offered their schools for shelter, their linens for beds, their showers for hygiene, and their home-cooked meals for three days until the passengers were finally able to fly home. None of the Newfoundlanders would take any money for these acts of kindness. And as Flight 15 took off again for Atlanta, Shirley Brook-Jones had an idea. She and her fellow passengers began a scholarship fund for the high school students of the area. She passed around a notebook and came up with initial contributions of \$15,000. Brook-Jones is a professional fund-raiser and she went to work.

That initial amount is now worth over \$2 million and fifteen years later 228 young people have received scholarships. What a story!

Now please notice that this is not a story of one lost sheep or one hero. This is a story of a whole community, that adopted and cared for a large number of people who were lost and frightened, like the sheep. They became like one human family, through the initial shock of this tragedy. They rejoiced together, and have continued to rejoice for the last 15 years.

Sometimes I'm a good story teller, and sometimes not so much. It's a skill that we all could work to perfect, since we are but pale imitations of the best story-teller of all time. Jesus.

The two stories that Jesus told in today's scripture are technically parables, short stories in which there is a surprise or a twist that leads to an unexpected insight about God and God's Kingdom.

The parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin are two of the briefest stories that Jesus ever told. Short, and succinct, and very visual, both have made it into the broader American lexicon in one way or another. I'm recalling "We are poor little sheep who have lost our way," or "Little Bo-Peep has lost her sheep," two examples of hundreds using the meme of lost sheep. As we saw today, it's also an easy story to tell children, because most of them can relate pretty easily to being lost. Often in sermons on this story I tell one or the other of our family's "lost child" stories, and I'm always tempted to do so. Believe me, it's both harder and easier with identical twins: harder to keep track of, but easier to show others what the lost one looks like! I'm sure you all have your own "lost kid"

stories and I don't want to belabor the point. Maybe you can tell lost kid stories over lunch!

The lost is found, and isn't that great! We all breathe a huge sigh of relief, we reintegrate the lost one, and we have a big party, a time of rejoicing. And if we turn this parable into an allegory, it seems so straightforward to understand. God is the ever-loving, ever-persistent, and ever-merciful seeker who never gives up on any one of us creatures. Each one of us is "lost" in our own way. Even the Pharisees, Jesus opponents, those who consider themselves to be so good, even they are lost, or so Jesus implies. Everyone has gone astray sometime in a bigger or smaller way.

Seeker and sought are the two main characters in this story, and so we are cast as the sinners who hope that God cares so much that no matter how many times or how far we stray, God will always find and forgive us, again and again if necessary. God will restore us to our place in the community of love through grace and not through merit. Some might say that's the whole Christian faith in a nutshell. You've heard it, now you can all go play at the picnic. Sermon over.

But wait! Being rescued as a lost sheep is a very reassuring message in a world where our values and institutions seem to be falling apart. What can we count on anymore? Can social media replace the connectivity and caring of a church community? We all want to be rescued when we need to be. We all want a safe place that promises to care for us. In this world so lopsidedly individualistic and selfish, the lost sheep feels like the right image for those who have turned their lives around.

Don't misunderstand me, there's nothing wrong with that narrative. As I look back over years, that's mostly what I've preached. But God wouldn't let me preach an old sermon today because I heard the story upside down.

What do I mean? Let's go back to the reason that Jesus told these stories in the first place. It was for the benefit of those self-righteous Pharisees, those religious purists tried to follow the law strictly. They were complaining because Jesus not only hung out with the riff raff (the prostitutes, tax collectors, the poor) but he invited them to EAT with him as well. The Pharisees wanted to draw the circle of the law close around themselves, and leave all those Other contaminated people out.

Jesus, in contrast, with his healing and teaching and preaching, is continuously drawing a circle that includes people. So turn this picture upside down in your head: instead of God being the big seeker, the chief rescue officer of all lost sheep, we have Jesus preaching the nearness of the Kingdom of God. A place that seeks to be a whole community, a completed family of God's people. Think of it this way: the problem with the lost sheep is not that one was lost, but that the community of 100 was not complete. That's what I was trying to get our kids to see, and maybe the rest of you did, too!

Likewise, the problem with lost 10th coin was hardly bothering the coin itself, which is not a living thing. In Jesus' time a woman's wedding headdress had ten coins in it. That piece of clothing was usually saved both as a memento and as a hedge against an uncertain future.

A marriage headband with only 9 coins was not complete. Thus its owner urgently wanted to find the missing one. The motive is for the thing to be made whole.

Now in our super individualistic society, this is a difficult new angle. We are educated to be moderately selfish, to be high individual achievers, to be outstanding students in the best colleges. The surprise, the twist in the story for us, is this: how can this seeking God be more interested in the “us” of this story than the “me”? Sometimes I think we are a nation of narcissists. (I’m not going to say anything political about that...)

But the original Hebrew will help us with this viewpoint. At the end, the shepherd and the woman, represent the seeker. Both of them use the word, “Come rejoice with me!” Chairo is the verb “rejoice with.” In Greek, it is all ONE WORD: rejoice with. You cannot separate the rejoicing from the with: Neither the seeker nor the lost sheep can rejoice by him or herself. Celebrating with joy is by definition a communal action.

That’s why, by the way, that our Open and Affirming church will be represented at the Pride Parade this afternoon.

I will confess to you that I am a universalist. I’ve always rebelled against that difficult Calvinist idea that God has elected – that is, God has pre-selected ahead of time - which people will make it into heaven. That idea is what allows us to be exclusive in church, like the Pharisees, that allows us to be hate-mongers in public, and encourages us to condone violence when it is directed against the non-elect.

I'm very grateful to be able to claim the U.C.C. slogan, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here."

I believe that Jesus greatest hope and greatest goal was that he would be able to spread the message of the gospel so far and so wide that everyone would be graced by God's abundant love and everyone would have the invitation to be included at God's table. "The Kingdom of God is very near you," he preached. The lost sheep, the lost coins, the lost sons are rescued, but for what? So that they can thrive as individuals? No, so that they can become part of the whole Beloved Community that Jesus has called together. We rejoice every time that fullness of time closer to being a reality.

The shepherd is concerned with the whole. The number 99 is a number of incompleteness. The one lost sheep found makes the flock whole, just as the lost coin completes the ten in the headdress.

The Pharisees were upset with Jesus' behavior, for sure. They were not upset that he asked the riff raff to repent. But they hated the idea that these people were of equal value and importance, to be welcomed into the fold like everyone else.

Too often we overlook this theme of community completeness when we get stuck on the salvation of the individual. As the people of God, we are unfinished without all these people, including the ones of whom we disapprove and including the ones we have refused to forgive.

We are only the 99. It is the 1% we are missing... In the irony of our current lingo, it is the 1% of God's creation that is missing. (And no, I'm not suggesting that the economic 1% and God's missing 1% are exactly the same people.) But in any case, we are incomplete without them.

The Gospel of Luke turns us around and shakes us up: it points us to perhaps the most fundamental fact of our faith. God is love, and that divine love is UNCONDITIONAL. At its foundation is inclusion of all.

Ephesians 1:10 says "This divine economy – God's plan of salvation – is a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth." We are called to help with this ingathering, this seeking, to reconcile all of humankind and especially to be reconciled with one another within this community.

Father Edward Beck says:

"Inclusion produces a wholeness that overflows into joy, when we let it. We can't help it. We are made for wholeness and inclusion. And whenever we live in that state, joy is the result. And when we don't? War and prejudice and discrimination and being lost is the result. "

Rejoice with me, friends and members and visitors at the First Congregational Church of Burlington. Rejoice that we are together. Rejoice that we will soon sit at the same table. And rejoice in the work we have before us, to invite everyone, old friends and new, to be a part of our circle. Amen.

Psalm 51

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight,
so you are justified in your sentence, blameless when you pass judgement.

Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my
secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I
shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and rightspirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit
from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue
will sing aloud of your deliverance.

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt-offering, you
would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt-offerings and whole burnt-
offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

'Or what woman having ten silver coins,* if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'