



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

“GIVING GOD JOY”

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September 5, 2010

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Luke 15. 1-10

A favorite biblical scholar on mine is Dr. James A. Sanders who taught his students to theologize first and moralize second when reading the Bible. By so speaking, Dr. Sanders encourages us to ask what is a story telling us about God before we ask what it is telling us to do. The sequence is important for the simple reason that if we start with ourselves - our behavior, our issues, our feelings, our needs - we are likely to miss the grace of God by which we are redeemed. Our lesson for today is a fine example of the wisdom of Dr. Sanders teaching.

It seems that tax collectors and sinners are coming in droves to hear Jesus. Why, we might ask. Well, back then, it was clear who were the sinners and who weren't. Those who could follow the Old Testament law, like the scribes and Pharisees, were judged to be righteous, good, worthy of emulation. But lots of others people, by virtue of circumstance or job or gender, often found themselves in the category of unclean, unrighteous, unworthy. We may bridle at such distinctions. We are wont to say, at least if not believe, that we make no such distinctions, that we believe with St. Paul that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” But in Jesus' time, the distinctions were clear and pretty much understood by all. The good folks among Jesus' hearers, here the scribes and the Pharisees – and probably that's us – are put out that Jesus not only welcomes sinners, but eats with them; thus, assuring he will be counted among the impure, the unclean. Their dogma was: You lie down with dogs, you gonna get up with fleas. Of course, if you can find fault with Jesus, you can find fault with anyone.

And to this mixed multitude of tax collectors, sinners, scribes and Pharisees, Jesus tells two deceptively simply, but utterly wonderful parables. At first glance, they appear almost identical, as if Luke, as is his custom, is working for inclusivity by having the main character of the first parable be a man, and of the second, a woman. In the first parable, a shepherd loses one per cent of his flock. In the second, a woman loses ten per cent of her coins. These will be followed by the story of a father who loses fifty per cent of his sons.

The one sheep gets lost because it wanders off from its community, the other ninety-nine sheep. A friend of mine speculates that this sheep found some good green grass, and like a lot of folks, just kept going after that green, pursuing more and more of that green, until it found itself lost and utterly alone. Maybe we know something about that pattern of behavior. We get confused about ends and means and overdo on things that seem good at first but don't finally serve us well. Fortunately for the sheep, it has a shepherd - who by the way does not own the sheep but only cares for them - who's willing to climb rocks, wade streams, push through brambles and whatever else it takes to find this sheep. The other

ninety-nine may not be all that thrilled at being left for a spell out in the wilderness without a shepherd, but they are hopefully comforted that he would do likewise for them. When the sheep is found, the shepherd returns home, gathers friends and neighbors and throws a party, food and drinks for everyone that his joy may be complete. That's how it is in heaven, says Jesus, when a single sinner repents. And it's a whole lot more fun than the grim righteousness of the always morally upright who are thankful only that they are not like 'those' people.

Likewise, a woman lost a coin, says Jesus. But unlike a sheep, a coin can't get lost of its own accord. Things happen in life. Relationships shred and shatter. Loved ones die. Health wanes. Jobs end. And we find ourselves lost, and that not of our own doing. But here comes this woman looking high and low, moving furniture, peering into corners by candlelight, sweeping up dust bunnies, until she finds that coin. Some scholars think this coin was part of her dowry and to lose it would have been a matter of considerable shame born of seeming carelessness. And when she finds it, she too throws a party for friends and neighbors. And again, says Jesus, in case you missed it the first time, that's how it is in heaven.

A friend of mine grew up in the sixties in one of the poorest parts of Trenton, New Jersey. He commented one day on how the state lottery had been so damaging to the community he called home. I assumed he meant because people without much money were spending too much of it on an odds against them gambling scheme. No, he said, that's not it. When I was a kid, he said, we had gambling, only it was playing the numbers. Every week, most folks in the neighborhood bet the numbers with a local bookie, and when somebody won, they didn't move out of the neighborhood like lottery winners often do; they threw a block party. There was joy for everyone because the winner said, 'Rejoice with me. All y'all come and celebrate.'

I wonder if Jesus isn't implicitly asking the Pharisees, and us, can you celebrate, can you rejoice, can you party, when somebody gets it right, gets found, or is your righteousness a proprietary concern that has little room for newcomers?

Let's go back to James Sanders' question about where is God in these stories. At the risk of stating the obvious, let me say that it seems clear that sheep and coins are incapable of repenting. And since that's the case, it must surely be that God in this story is the sheep-seeking shepherd and the coin-seeking woman, two folks pretty much at the bottom of the social ladder. God here is not a king, not a prophet, not a lion, but two of the most looked down upon – a woman and shepherd. Maybe that doesn't particularly astonish us. After all, a pastor of this church, Dr. William Lemon, after whom that wing is named, used to begin his prayers regularly saying, O God, our father and mother. And that seventy years ago. But remember and be clear, shepherds and women were the outsiders, the sinners, the unclean, the pitied at best and despised at most. There were no female scribes or Pharisees. And so, Jesus is saying that God is like this unclean shepherd, this woman who seeks after that which is lost. And why? Because this God believes that that which is lost, whether sinner or tax collector, whether by will or circumstance, has value and is worthy of love.

And therefore, scribes and pharisees, it's not so much about our uprightness as it is about God's goodness and grace and searching love that will find us. And if that's not cause for celebration, dearly beloved, I do not know what is. God is love - searching, seeking love that wants us to join the great community of the joyfully found. That's good news.

And if we are the objects of God's love, however lost we may be, then everyone is. God's work is to bring us all home, even folks we don't much respect or like or care for. Truly, as commentator Greg Carey observes, we are incomplete without the presence of all those whom God has found, the sinners and tax collectors if we fancy ourselves scribes and Pharisees; the scribes and Pharisees if we find ourselves sinners and tax collectors. Repentance isn't abject groveling and self-hate, but rather, as says Dick Jensen, "acceptance of the reality that God has found us in Jesus Christ." Can we believe that? And more, can we rejoice in that? That everyone is beloved of God, the shepherd-woman, who is throwing a party? That Jew and Greek and Muslim, male and female, gay and straight, rich and poor, believer and atheist, saint and sinner, that all are sought by God out of love. Oh, I do hope so.

At the beginning of this passage, it says that the scribes and Pharisees murmured because Jesus ate with sinners. Nothing worse than a bunch of folks at a party who stand to the side criticizing who was invited, what food was served, what clothes people are wearing, and all the rest, distancing themselves from the celebration. The Pharisee in us does not excel at joy. The counterpoint to this murmuring is the call to 'rejoice with me' uttered by the sheep finding shepherd and the coin finding woman. Jesus is saying to that group, the scribes and Pharisees, drop your righteousness that is self-righteousness, drop your cynicism, drop your arrogant distancing, for I have found you, too, and you are welcome. It's really why all are welcome at the Lord's table. It's not about our worthiness or unworthiness; it's about God's grace. And thank goodness it is so, or none would feast. As one commentator so accurately observes, "Only those who can celebrate God's grace to others can experience that mercy themselves."

A year ago July, a group of fourteen people, all of whom either worked at or were regulars at the Island Grill in Newberry, Michigan won the state lottery to the tune of \$347,000 each, after taxes. Newberry is a town of 1700, that doesn't have a traffic light, but does have a buck pole in front of the American Legion. It's a town where several business and small manufacturers have gone belly up in recent years. Detroit Free Press writer Jeff Seidel wrote of Newberry, "Everybody knows everybody, and gossip spreads like a cold through a kindergarten class." How I wish I'd thought up that metaphor! Word spread of the lottery winners good fortune, and soon it seemed like the whole town had crowded into the Island Grill.

Now a lot of times when folks win the lottery - especially if they live in a place where you can miss summer entirely if you happen to be out of town that weekend - a lot of folks would say, 'So long, nice to have known you, but I'm out of here. Hello Florida.' Kind of like what the lottery did to Trenton, New Jersey. Not so for these folks in Newberry. Oh, they all quit their jobs as cooks and dishwashers and wait staff at the Island Grill, but they stayed in town. They not only stayed, they spent their money right in town and thereby reinvigorated a terribly devastated local economy. Several of the

winners were lifelong renters who now bought or built homes, and they hired local plumbers and electricians to do needed work. Most of the winners bought cars from the local dealer. They bought furniture from a local store about to go under. They got long deferred dental work done. And the town found new life. Rejoice with me, friends and neighbors, for I have found what was lost; in this case, a future. What further amazes me about this Newberry tale is that most of those who worked at the Island Grill have come back to work, not because they need the money, but because they miss and need the community they shared there.

And so it is when we find ourselves found by the God of grace. Our being found by our searching shepherd-woman-God of love gives rise to a corporate joy, for joy not shared isn't really joy. Even God needs the angels and host of heaven to have a party. And we are all invited. Thanks be to God.

Amen +

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Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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