

# The Joy of Being Found

Luke 15:1-10  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I have not failed to notice that several folks in this congregation, including myself, are either single or live alone. One of the primary difficulties this presents is that there is no one else to blame when we lose or misplace something. There's no one else to yell out to, "Where'd you put the remote?" or phone, or keys, or wallet, or homework, or anything else.

This also means there's no one else to help us look for whatever we ourselves have lost or misplaced. Yet because of that fact, perhaps we experience even more joy when what was lost is eventually found.

Experiencing joy in finding that which has been lost is the theme in the two parables we read from today's Gospel lesson in Luke 15. The lectionary stops at verse 10, but if you read the rest of the chapter, you'll find these two parables are immediately followed by the famous parable of the Prodigal Son, another example of being lost and found. Perhaps the most common interpretation of all three of these parables – the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son – is that **God, through Jesus, comes to seek and to save those who are lost – and we are all lost – in need of the Good Shepherd, in need of redemption.**

As with all parables, however, we need to look for something a bit deeper, for if we aren't shocked by anything, then we have probably missed Jesus' original point. Throughout his ministry, Jesus introduced people to the kingdom of God, a place of upside-down rules. These **parables are kingdom stories** that reflect the radical nature of God's love – not only for us, but for all people.

Sure, God is joyful when a sinner repents. But it's more than that. Perhaps the most shocking thing we learn is that **God invites the rest of us to join the celebration – to be merciful and accepting as God is merciful and accepting.**

We tend to overlook the end of each of these parables. After the shepherd leaves 99 of his 100 sheep in the wilderness to search for the one that is lost, we're told, "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that has been lost.'" So, too, when **the woman (yes, an example of a female image of God)** finds one of her ten lost coins we're told, "She calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.'" And though it's not part of today's lesson, most of you will remember that when the prodigal son returns home, his father rejoices by throwing a huge party. The older son, however – the righteous, follow-all-the-rules guy, becomes jealous and bitter with all the rejoicing. So his father comes out to him to invite him to also join the party. But the parable ends without us knowing whether or not the older brother decides to rejoice with his father and younger brother.

The same applies to the first two parables. The question is left up in the air. Will the friends and neighbors of the shepherd rejoice with him? We don't know. Will the friends and neighbors of the woman rejoice with her? We don't know. **Often the point of a parable is the unanswered question that the hearers are left to answer for themselves.** Would you, would I, rejoice with the shepherd, the woman, or the father over finding what was lost?

In the conclusions to these parables, it is clear that all of heaven is rejoicing. But the real question is: Will we join with the heavenly host in their rejoicing over sinners being found? **Why is it so important whether we rejoice or not?** One biblical commentator explains it this way: "I think this is a very important question for churches today. More than one congregational member has not rejoiced over the influx of new members in the congregation. The non-rejoicing criticism seems especially prevalent when the 'found' are somehow different from the mainstream members."

**Perhaps this is one of the major problems in declining "mainstream" Protestant churches today – the inability to accept those who aren't considered "mainstream".** What makes someone different from the "mainstream"? The usual list applies: it could be based on issues dealing with race, language, vocation, age, education, sexuality, Christian maturity, or even emotional health. In other words the difference could be in:

- African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, or those from non-European countries coming to an all-white congregation;
- Blue-collar workers coming to a white-collar congregation;
- Young parents with children coming to a mostly quiet, sedate, retired congregation;
- High School drop-outs coming to a college-educated congregation;
- Gays, lesbians and transgendered persons coming to a straight congregation;
- New converts coming to an "always-been-Presbyterian" congregation;
- Emotionally unstable persons coming to a "we-got-it-all-together" congregation;
- Even trying to bring gospel-joy singing to a "we-only-sing-hymns-written-by-dead-German-guys" congregation.

Churches that find themselves in changing, or already changed, neighborhoods are faced with all this the most. Such is the case with this nearly 100-year old congregation here in the Kendall-Whittier neighborhood. So, also, do rural communities that now find themselves in the midst of suburban sprawl.

The all-too-common question being pondered is, "Are they enough like us so that we don't have to change or be uncomfortable in any way?"

Now, just in case we don't think these parables are a rebuke of religious-insiders (and by application in Luke's day, the church) all we have to do is look at the context in which Jesus told them. We learn in verses 1-2 that Jesus is keeping bad company, for he associates and eats with ungodly persons. The scriptures use the phrase, "**tax collectors and sinners.**" And yet, these undesirables have come to **listen** to Jesus.

On the other hand, by contrast, we learn that the Pharisees and the scribes – the good religious folks – are **grumbling**. They are not happy with the company Jesus keeps. It is to these good religious folks (and yes, folks like us) that Jesus told these parables about rejoicing when the lost are found.

**What is often missed about Jesus' ministry, and therefore about the character of God, is that he *already* valued others as people of value and worth before there was any repentance.** The same applies to how God approaches each one of us! This is an expression of love. The love is unconditional. But this love is also very challenging, because Jesus was also inviting them (and us) as valued people to become part of the present and future vision of the kingdom of God. He was not doing so in order to *make* them valued and worthy of love, but because they were *already* people that were valued and loved and accepted.

God continually seeks the possibility of transformation in each one of us, not in order to make us people of value and worthy of God's love, but because we are *already* people of value and worth and are *already* loved and accepted by God. **Jesus put the loving first, rather than withholding it until after repentance** – which is best described as a change of heart and mind and practice. We are being taught that **in the kingdom of God, people matter most!**

Again, in that sense, it is unconditional love, but this should not be seen as love that does not care about what people are doing to themselves and others. Rather, today's parables illustrate that God celebrates the recovery of every person, like a shepherd might celebrate the recovery of a lost sheep, or a woman the recovery of a lost coin.

If you find yourself in the 'lost' category, then I encourage you to allow yourself to be found by God, a God who never stops seeking that which has gone astray. If you find yourself in the 'found' category, then you are encouraged to join in the celebration of others who are found. To join in the celebration, however, we must also share in God's mercy and acceptance. **We must want mercy and acceptance not just for ourselves but also for those "not like us."**

**God is always throwing a party, and we are *all* invited. The question remains whether or not we will join in the rejoicing.**

Amen.

Resources:

Richard Donovan, Proper 19C, sermonwriter.com  
 Brian Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes, Proper 19C  
 William Loader, Pentecost 16C  
 R. Alan Culpepper, Lectionary Homiletics