

Luke 15: 1-10 “Finding Joy”

Today, September 11th, is a difficult day to talk about Joy, because on this anniversary of the “Nine Eleven,” we are reminded of the violence, the destruction, and the pain we suffered as a nation and the individual lives lost or changed forever; it shook the rest of the world, too. We are sadly familiar with pains in our lives, personal and collective, ones we’ve caused and ones in which we take the blunt of the world’s brokenness. Even so, and because this is so, God’s invitation to find joy greets us every day, even today, especially today. Pray with me. May the words of the Scripture lead us from our brokenness to the wholeness God desires for each one of us and for this world. Amen.

In the Gospel passage today, you might by now recognize the usual suspect of characters: the Pharisees and the scribes, observing Jesus from a safe distance, close enough to keep a tab on him and far enough not to be associated with what in their eyes are scandalous behaviors. In this case, he’s talking to the tax collectors and the sinners; not just a few but a whole lot of them had come near to Jesus to listen to him, and Jesus was sharing meals with them.

As we learned in the earlier scenes from Luke, to have someone at one’s table meant full acceptance of them. Here, the Pharisees and the scribes, who are eager to follow the law in every aspect of their lives, are appalled to see Jesus welcoming the sinners. In their religious tradition, repentance was a praised virtue, but for a religious leader to reach out to the sinners. That was not on their books.

As for Jesus, how annoying it must have been to always have these guys be on his back, waiting for an opportunity to criticize and say “Gotcha!” But instead of avoiding them or hiding from them, Jesus is the one who takes the initiative and engages with them. Aware of their grumbling, Jesus offers them these 2 parables.

In the first parable, Jesus equates the one sheep which had been lost and then found with one sinner who repented, and the 99 sheep that stayed where they were supposed to with the 99 righteous people who had no need to repent. He says there is more joy in heaven over that one sinner who repented, than 99 who were already with God. In other words, God's desire is for the flock to be whole; it is the wholeness of God's beloved community that is the cause for celebration by the whole community.

And did you notice this bit of detail in the story: the shepherd goes looking for the lost sheep until he finds it. God's search for the lost one is relentless. God would not give up on the one; God insists God's flock be whole, and when that happens, it brings everyone joy.

But these Pharisees and the scribes are so focused on their own righteousness, and in their understanding, the sinners are beyond the pale of God's concern anyways. Here they miss the point that God cares about the whole of God's creation and would not stand missing even one part.

Listening to this parable, the Pharisees and the scribes most likely see themselves in the 99 righteous people. Yet, when we step back and look at this scene Luke is describing, who are the ones coming near to Jesus to listen to him? Not just a few but a whole flock of tax collectors and sinners. They are where they should be, hearing Jesus's voice. It is the Pharisees and the scribes who are keeping their distance; they are the ones not on the path with Jesus. Jesus knows who the lost ones are here, even though the Pharisees and the scribes themselves are clueless. At that moment, Jesus is their shepherd coming to find them, yes, even them.

There are people in our lives we'd like to dismiss by saying "Oh, they're clueless. They're lost." Though the parable features 99 righteous who are in no need of repentance, elsewhere in the Bible we are told none of us are righteous but

God. That lost sheep is each and every one of us, and God is always searching for us to bring us home.

In the second parable, God is this woman who embarks on a thorough search of her lost coin. Again, it's not just a coin that went missing, but a coin that is one of the 10 that she knows to be hers. Yes, a single coin has its own value that is worth going looking for, but the parable presents this missing coin in light of 10 coins that belong to her. With one missing, the woman cannot be made whole. So, she searches everywhere, lighting the lamp and sweeping the floor; she would not rest until she finds it. Here in this parable, too, the coin that was lost and then found stands for one sinner who repented.

A lost coin cannot do anything to make itself more discoverable any more than the lost sheep can figure out the way home by itself. While the Pharisees and the scribes consider themselves righteous because of their righteous conduct, both these parables point to a different reality; the discovery and the recovery of what's lost is totally dependent on the part of the One who relentlessly "seeks" them.

This "seeking" is the pursuing love of God for us. God seeks us in our lostness, whether we are a tax collector or a Pharisee, a disciple of Jesus or one who denies him, a clergy or a lay person, a high school dropout or a PhD, or... name any labels we put on ourselves, God comes to us as where we are, without one plea, and God would not rest until the last one of us is found and God's beloved community is restored... and at any given moment, we, that is each one of us, are that one God is relentlessly seeking.

The good news is, as both these parables tell us, God will have the last laugh, and God invites everyone to laugh and rejoice together in God's heavenly kingdom. God will have God's way with us, and that is the source of our comfort and joy. God's joy in finding us and our joy in being found in God, whole and not one missing.

So, how does God find us? These parables liken the sinners to those in the state of being lost. In the Biblical sense, “sin” is not necessarily any immoral acts our English word implies, but the act of missing the target, the target being the living of God’s given life in accordance with what God intends for us. So also, the “righteousness” in the biblical sense is about being in the right relationship with God or being on the right path. So, the unrighteous would be the one who has strayed from the path God has laid and lost one’s way. To get back on the right path, to walk in the way of God, one would need to turn around. And that turning around, the changing one’s way, is what is meant by “Repentance.”

God has given the people the commandments, has sent Prophets, and in the fullness of time Jesus, to find us where we are and gather us back to God’s fold, turning back to God. For us the post Easter resurrection people, the gifts of the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Spirit are given as our ever-present guide and help. And, although we are often blind to our own lostness, that doesn’t prevent God from using us to reach out to others, to find them, to bring them home. Even though we are lost ourselves, we still feel pain when we see others struggle and suffer, we feel sorrow when we see others who seem so lost or have gone down the wrong path, whether they are family members, colleagues, or strangers, even enemies.

The same Love that moved God to send Christ to us, sends us to reach out to love and care for one another, pray for one another, with the same relentless God pursues us. We can take comfort in knowing that God won’t quit until the last one missing is found.

So, as we walk through this broken world, even on this day of anniversary of a tragedy, staying close to Jesus and following the path, we pray thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.