

“Grace”
September 11, 2001
Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
Luke 15:1-10

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

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 neighbors, 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 persons 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 neighbors, 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."

Introduction

Can you hear the music? Today's gospel reading mentions joyous celebrations, and we hear about parties in heaven! Ever wonder what a party sounds like in heaven? At first you hear the music off in the distance. But as you get closer, you know there's a celebration going on. So why the party? What's going on? We have to start where today's passage begins.

The Wrong People

In his gospel Luke writes:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near Jesus to listen to him. The tax collectors and the sinners. As Jesus has been moving all around Galilee, these are some of the people he is attracting. The wrong people. Tax collectors are corrupted sell-outs. They shake down their own people for money, giving it to Rome, while pocketing some for themselves. And the sinners—that would be anyone not keeping the Law found in the holy Scriptures; the ones far from the righteous people of God; the wayward and the lost. But now something has caught their attention. Someone has their ear; and it's this Jesus of Nazareth.

And the Pharisees and the scribes, Luke writes, were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

AAHHH! He eats with them. What's he doing? This is a major line being crossed in this culture; who you eat with is a big deal. That's why Jesus is getting the evil eye. So he cuts the tension with his typical response: he tells them a parable:

A Missing Sheep

"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 neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'

Sheep are easily led astray, and at some point they will likely get lost. Isn't that the story of our lives? Something happens along the way and we lose our bearings and before we know it we are lost. Lost as individuals, lost as families, and lost as entire nations and cultures.

But for the *good* shepherd, with the loss of even one out a hundred, the course is set—the missing sheep must be found. And in this story the sheep is found by one excited shepherd who can't wait to share the good news with his friends and neighbors.

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

A sinner who repents. Repentance means celebration. Repentance is a word we hear a lot about in Scripture.

"Repent! The kingdom of God is near!" The message of Jesus and John the Baptist before him. This is a story about grace and how we respond to it. Grace is the ongoing activity of God in our lives. It is what comes after us when we are lost. It finds and rescues us. It saves us and perfects us in the love of God and neighbor. When grace catches up with you, it is only natural that you repent, which literally means to stop, do a 180, and move back in the direction of God.

And that's what Jesus is looking for. He hasn't come for those who have no need to repent.

A Missing Coin

But Jesus tells another parable. Because why stop at one? They work so well at getting under the skin!

"What woman," Jesus asks, "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?"

Something is wrong; a coin is missing. She lays them out and counts them: one, two, three; four, five, six; seven, eight, nine; and ____ ! One is lost. Immediately, she goes into search mode: the lights go on, she sweeps the house clean searching for the coin. This is something of great value to her, and she will stop until she has found it.

And she does find it, and there's no holding back her happiness. Apparently, it's time for a party! Jesus says,

"When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.'

Recently someone dropped their small purse just outside Fellowship Hall on the steps down to the parking lot. I brought it into the office and it stayed there for a little over a week until the owner was notified that we found it, and it was returned to her. A week later I saw her in the parking lot and she came to me to tell name how happy and

thankful she was, and that she called her friends to let them know she had found her purse. I was taken aback at how excited she was that she had found it. She valued it highly; just like the woman in the parable valuing her tenth coin. Just like God valuing each and every one of our lives. When something like that is found there is pure joy.

“Just so, I tell you,” Jesus says, *“there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*

When someone who has been lost is found, and there is repentance, it's party time in heaven! Repentance is the response to grace. When it dawns on us that we are valued by the one who contains the entire universe of creation, what can we do but turn back to God in the name of Jesus. That's repentance. And repentance means celebration.

Three Things for the Mission

What then are we to do? When we hear the good news that, in Jesus Christ, God is looking for the lost; that the world had been so lost that God stepped into humanity as a man born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth to search and rescue the ones who regarded as beyond hope, what do we do? There are three things we can take from these parables:

1) **Repent.** It's how we respond to the gift of grace. Turn from the way you are moving and move back toward God

2) **Eat with Sinners.** In this story we may only think of ourselves as the ones who have been lost but are now found. But sometimes we are the Pharisees and scribes, you know the party poopers who, with our arms folded and our tongues clucking, pass judgment on the undesirables; the unrighteous ones we blame for all our problems.

Think of the person or group who you would never be caught dead with. The ones your friends would say, “I can't believe he is hanging around with that person,” or “Why would she spend time with them?” Got the idea? Go have lunch with them.

Jesus is called the great physician and he said he did not come for the ones who are well, but for the sick who need a cure. That's why he goes to those no one else wants to go to. You may be thinking, “Why in the world would pastor tell us to be with people like that?” Because we are the conduits of God's grace. We are the vessels through which God's grace continues to spread through the world. This is our calling. We are called to be salt and light. God's grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit is the last hope for humanity. If we are not going to share that good news, and be the agents of healing and reconciliation, then who will?

3) **Celebrate!** When the lost are found it's time to have a party. Jesus always said the kingdom of heaven is near. And if heaven can celebrate when someone repents, then so can we. Can you hear the music now? There's a party going on! It's like you're at a wedding and the DJ puts on Kool and the Gang's *Celebration!* Celebrate good times, come on!

*There's a party going on right here
A celebration to last throughout the years
So bring your good times and your laughter too
We're gonna celebrate your party with you!
Celebrate good times, come on!*

This is how Jesus describes the angels in heaven when someone turns back to God. So today we celebrate grace. Grace. The ongoing activity of God in our lives. That mysterious movement of the Holy Spirit. Do you see it your own lives? How God values you? How God has always had a concern and a watchful eye for you? You can see it today in River's baptism. The Holy Spirit is already operating in his life. And even though he has done nothing to bring it about, here he is being baptized. That's grace and that's why we celebrate!

- 1) Repent
- 2) Eat with sinners—Jesus did.
- 3) Celebrate, that which was lost has been found!

Amen.