

## Let's Have a Party

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It is easy to enter the vivid scenes described in these stories from Luke's gospel. We can see that shepherd coming home at the end of the day, tired and thirsty and ready for his supper. His feet are killing him. Just as the sun is going down he realizes that he is missing a sheep and must go back out again: back on the rocky road that winds up and up into the hills. When he reaches the top he digs into the brambles, looking for his animal. There is nothing there for him except stickers. This means that he must go on down into the wadi, that sharp ravine where robbers love to hide. The shadows deepen and the shepherd's heart is in his throat as scrambles down and looks over his shoulder. Where, O where, is that sheep?

We can also jump right into the scene of the woman who has lost her coin. It represents a full day's wage and she is not giving it up. So, since there are no windows in her house, she lights a lamp in the middle of the day, an extravagant luxury. Then, she moves all the furniture out of the house into the street. This takes a while and the neighbors gather around and tease her. Next the woman grabs the broom and begins sweeping the floor. The floor is made of dirt, so there is no telling what all is down there and how many layers may be hiding the coin. And so she sweeps, and sweeps, and sweeps.

Oh, we can imagine these scenes alright. And we can also picture the big celebrations that followed. The shepherd comes home with a sheep wrapped around his neck like a feather boa. He has a huge grin in a face full of scratches. *I found my sheep!* He hollers out to his neighbors. *Let's have a party.* The woman emerges from her house, smiling and covered with dirt. *I found it*, she yells, holding up a small coin between her fingers. *Let's have a party!* And since the furniture has already been moved out, everyone goes inside and dances.

But there is another more complicated scene in this gospel. It features Jesus, the storyteller himself. He is speaking in the middle of a crowd of people who are listening intently. Some stand shyly on the side as if they are afraid of being noticed and chased away. Others sit in a pack and look tough. People stand back and give them a lot of room but these guys notice nothing but Jesus. They hang on his every word. Next, some important looking religious people come into the scene and start criticizing Jesus. They interrupt the class and complain that Jesus associates with the wrong people. In fact, they have been doing this for several chapters now in Luke's gospel and it is only going to get worse. The tension is growing. The audience is nervous. How will Jesus handle this?

How do you handle it when someone verbally attacks you or undermines you or publicly embarrasses you? Some of us leave the room while others argue back and launch a defense. Still others try to ignore it and stick to the lesson plan. But I am guessing that every one of us replays the scene later and imagines what we could have said. All the best

responses usually come to mind the next day. Did you ever lie in bed at night and have a brilliant conversation with yourself inside your head? You replay the offensive scene and make a magnificent speech that stuns everyone. It leaves your adversaries whimpering, and permits you to make a dramatic exit into the limousine that pulls up at just the right moment.

But Jesus does something completely different. In fact, his response is a little odd. In the face of confrontation, as he is being condemned because of his bad taste in his friends, Jesus talks about, of all things,... joy. He responds to personal attack by talking about joy, and not just any joy, he speaks of God's joy.

The parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin are followed by the story of the Prodigal Son, and these three stories make up the entire 15<sup>th</sup> chapter in the Gospel of Luke. They are not found in the other gospels except for a similar lost sheep story in Matthew. Luke 15 stands alone as a surprise in the middle of the gospel, as if the writer pauses to create an explicit profile of God for his readers. All three parables are about lost things being found and the celebrations that follow. They are all about God's joy. ***Let's have a party.***

In recent years, the Christian Church in this country has weighed in on everything from lifestyle choices to foreign policy. In public discourse strong branches of the church have preached judgment and condemnation, and respect for some forms of life but not others. If you are new to Christianity, you are beginning to see that many of us in the church are not happy with how our faith has been portrayed. But then, we also run the risk of thinking that we have all the right answers. Like any big, unruly family, the Christian Church has many faces and opinions and in-house feuds. But in the midst of debate and competition for influence, sometimes we forget the most important things we have been taught about God. Luke anticipates this and gives us chapter 15. God is not just about judgment, God is also about joy.

God is not particularly interested in guilt in chapter 15. Nobody is going to blame a dumb sheep or a coin. Even the sins of the wretched prodigal son are overlooked because the father is so ridiculously happy. In the same way, God takes great joy in us when we are pulled out of the brambles of our failures and bad choices. God rejoices when we shake off the dirt of our self absorption and see the world around us. ***Let's have a party.***

All of this is good news because we do not have to obsess about guilt and judgment and things that anger God. We can focus instead on all the things that make God happy. Things like loving our neighbor, no matter how weird or awful they may appear to be. Remember that while this got Jesus into trouble, it also launched his parables about God's joy. God's joy in us liberates us to be talking about what God loves rather than what God may throw into outer darkness. Judgment is not our business, but making God happy is.

I hope we catch Luke's bug here today and start doing everything we can think of that will bring God joy. God loves it when we are generous and share what we have with

others. God delights in conversation with us, even when we are not sure we are hearing anything. God enjoys our company, so take time to be in the presence of God and pray. Your words are not nearly as important as your presence.

It gives God joy when we organize our best thoughts and ideas for healing the suffering of the world. Jesus' own ministry was filled with healing and ours is, too, when we work for peace or to alleviate another's pain. This week the Trinity Church vestry heard a report from our task force on homelessness. A dozen parishioners researched homelessness in the City of Boston for 6 months and have produced a report that is equally illuminating and heartbreaking. It will soon be made available to the parish and I commend it to you. You will learn about grandparents who are raising young children on our streets because they were evicted from senior housing when they took in their abandoned grandchildren. You will also meet runaway boys, 14 to 18 years old, who live on the streets in Boston because they are ineligible for traditional services. Undocumented immigrant families live in the shadows in fear of detection on our streets. Those haunted by the demons of mental illness and addiction number in the thousands on the streets of Boston. The report also reminds us that many of our housed neighbors are living on the edge, just one paycheck or one accident away from homelessness.

People just like these sat in rapt attention at the feet of Jesus. When they were criticized and he was attacked, he turned it into an occasion to teach about God's joy when human beings are found and restored. No matter how lost we become, we all have a place on God's shoulders to be carried back to safety and to the warmth of home.

Take your place in the scene at the feet of Jesus today. Learn all you can from the one who promises us a feast in God's Kingdom, where our dining partners will always be a surprise. Take your place in the scene where those who are lost are found and bring God joy. You are included, and God is always and already looking for you. As you go through your days this week, look for opportunities to give God joy. ***Let's have a party.***

Amen.