



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Joy in Heaven

Luke 15:1-10

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We've all experienced a noisy part next door or down the street and been annoyed that it kept us awake. Or maybe we were miffed that we weren't invited. A woman I used to work with told me one Monday morning how their neighbours had thrown a big party that weekend. Years before they'd had a falling out with those neighbours and no longer had any contact with them, so instead of going next door and asking them to be quiet, they took it as an opportunity for revenge and called the police. The police went to the neighbour's house and asked them to a little quieter and then came to my friend's door to follow-up. The police officer told them they were being petty. Their neighbours were celebrating because their son had just come home from the war in Afghanistan. A year before they had lost contact with him and had feared he was dead. But now he was home and they were celebrating. My co-worker said that when she heard that she and her husband felt like real jerks. They didn't even know their neighbour's son had been away. We've probably all been killjoys at some point in time, resenting someone else's celebration, often because we don't understand the reasons for their joy.

In Chapter 15, Luke changes gears a bit as Jesus responds to the criticisms of the Pharisees. Remember that they had their vision of the kingdom and their idea of how God was going to work to bring it on earth, but Jesus is living something very different. And so while Jesus celebrates the coming of the kingdom, the Pharisees are grumbling and gnashing their teeth that he's doing it all wrong. Look at verses 1-2:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

It was bad enough that Jesus would accept invitations from tax collectors and sinners, but now Luke tells us that Jesus is hosting his own banquets and actually, deliberately choosing to invite these people. As far as the Pharisees are concerned, if Jesus is the Messiah, he's doing it very wrong.

Tax collectors are pretty unpopular in any society, but they were especially unpopular in the Jewish world. They represented everything that was wrong with the world. They collected taxes for the Roman occupiers and for the corrupt Herodians and through them the people saw themselves being robbed to pay for their own oppression. And that's not to mention that tax collectors were known for their dishonesty—padding their bills and lining their own pockets. "Sinners" fit in with tax collectors. The Pharisees weren't just referring to any old sinners. The term is somewhat technical and refers either to people who were unclean because of the profession or to people who were just too poor or illiterate to be bothered with the standards of Jewish purity. Some might be overtly sinful, like prostitutes, but shepherds and tanners, for example, were often perpetually ceremonially unclean because of the things they regularly contacted in their work. Because they were unclean they were barred from the ceremonial life of Israel. They were "outsiders".

And yet Jesus, in coming as the Messiah and in coming to inaugurate God's kingdom, is throwing banquets for just these sorts of people. The prophets had foretold the Messiah's coming in terms of a great banquet to which all the righteous would be invited. The Pharisees expected that they'd be at the head table at that banquet. But instead, Jesus is undermining everything the Pharisees and the other "righteous" people stand for. He tells stories that predict the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. He warns the zealots against seeking God's kingdom by the sword. He describes the people who thought they were righteous as hiding their light under baskets. Everything Jesus is doing is like a stick in the eye of these people who were convinced they were on God's side. They're angry. And so Jesus tells them three parables in response. All three have to do with something that's lost and then found again and in each of them Jesus asks the Pharisees: "Wouldn't you celebrate if you found something precious

that was lost? This is what's happening. I'm celebrating with these people because the lost are being found." In these three parables Jesus is showing them and us precisely what the kingdom is all about—and in doing that he's calling to repentance anyone and everyone who has any other idea of what the kingdom is about. We'll look at the first two of these parables this morning. Look first at verses 3-6:

So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'"

Notice that this whole passage is one long question that Jesus puts to the Pharisees: "Which of you having lost a sheep wouldn't do all these things and then celebrate when you've found the animal?"

Shepherds weren't their kind of people, but they could identify with the story. A flock of a hundred sheep was about average. This wasn't a rich man, but he wasn't poor either. At the end of the day he'd lead his flock back the sheepfold and count them as they went through the gate. This night he notices that one is missing. He's still got ninety-nine, but that one missing sheep was still valuable. He couldn't afford to write it off. And so he leaves his sheep with the other shepherds and goes off into the night to find his lost sheep. Everyone could imagine this shepherd hunting high and low in the dark for the sheep, worrying not just about the possibility of wild animals eating the sheep, but eating him too. And finally he finds it. Sheep are natural herd animals, so when they wander off and get separated from the flock they get frightened and shut down. Jesus describes the man doing what any shepherd would do: picking up the frightened sheep and carrying it across his shoulders, back to the sheepfold.

When the man went out into the dark to find the sheep he probably thought that there was a good chance he was wasting his time—that he would probably never find the sheep in the dark and that by morning it would be eaten. He himself could have been attacked or fallen into a

ravine while searching. But he went out anyway and was surprised himself to find the sheep. And so he invites his fellow shepherds to celebrate with him. The sheep that was lost has been found! Jesus is asking the Pharisees: If this happened to you, wouldn't you celebrate? And the obvious answer is that, yes, they would. We all would.

Skipping now to verses 8-9 Jesus tells them a second parable. This time it's not one of ninety-nine that's lost; it's one of ten. (In the third parable it's one of two.)

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And 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.’”

The man with the flock of one hundred sheep was reasonably well off. In contrast, the woman Jesus describes now is destitute. The coins would probably have been part of her dowry—maybe all there was to her dowry—and made into a headdress. Headdresses with hundreds of coins were and are common, so we get a sense of how poor this woman is in that her dowry consisted of ten silver coins. We can imagine her on this day taking out her precious headdress and putting it on, maybe remembering her wedding day long ago. And as she puts it away she notices that one of the ten little coins is missing. She panics, looks around, but she can't find it. The sort of little mud-brick house someone like her would have lived in had a small door and maybe a tiny window. The house would have been dark. She lights her little oil lamp, but even that doesn't do very much for her, so she starts sweeping the floor with palm fronds, hoping to hear the coin scrape on the floor or, if all else fails, to sweep it up.¹ This was an image the Pharisees could easily identify with and Jesus is asking them: “If this happened to you and after all the panic and after all the searching and sweeping you finally found the coin, would you not call your friends

to tell them the good news and to celebrate?” Of course they would.

The answer to both of Jesus' questions is “yes”. In fact, even two thousand years distant from the shepherd or the poor woman, we can sense their loss and we can celebrate with them as Jesus describes their joy. The Pharisees were no different. Jesus may even have got them thinking of some time they lost something and then found it and were joyful. But here's the twist this joy explains why Jesus celebrates with tax collectors and sinners: something that was precious to him was lost, but now it has been found. In verse 7, at the end of the first parable, as the shepherd celebrates with his friends, Jesus says to the Pharisees:

“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.

And in verse 10 as the woman celebrates her found coin he says:

“Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Jesus profoundly shames the self-righteousness of the Pharisees. He has a remarkable way of telling stories that cut right to the heart of things. The Pharisees were criticising Jesus, but Jesus shows them that to criticise him is to reveal just how they've misunderstood the kingdom of God and just how they've got God's plans totally wrong. Jesus' earthly celebrations mirror a heavenly celebration. God loves sinners. He doesn't love what we do and that's why Jesus stresses that discipleship, at its very core, involves repentance, but God loves sinners and wants to see them—wants to see us—repent. We're reminded here of Jesus' words in John 3:16-17:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

You see, the Pharisees were anticipating the end of the age and they were ready for God to send his Son into the world to

condemn sinners. The Pharisees were *partly* right. They were right to look forward to a day of coming judgement when God's Son would come to condemn sinners and to vindicate the righteous. What they got wrong was that it never occurred to them that God would send his Son, not just at the end of history, but would first send him into the middle of history, to call sinners to repentance and to offer himself as a sacrifice for their sins. Jesus stepped into the middle of history to redeem sinners so that when he comes at the end of history we won't be condemned.

Two thousand years before Jesus came, God called Abraham to be a light to the nations, to make God known, and to call them to repentance. But down through the centuries Israel did the opposite. And that's part of Jesus' rebuke here. His parable of the lost sheep has very strong echoes of Ezekiel 34.

Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.”

“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out...and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness...I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed,

¹ For background details for both parables see Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1972), pp. 132-135 and Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Baker Academic, 1998), pp. 782-785.

and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.” (Ezekiel 34:2b-6, 11, 12b, 14-16)

The Pharisees knew all of this and of all people should have understood what Jesus was up to. The Sadducees, the religious leaders in Jesus’ day, were corrupt sell-outs much as the religious leaders of Ezekiel’s day had been. They got fat and wealthy at the expense of the sheep. The Pharisees opposed them and were calling for reform, but it was the wrong kind of reform. Their solution was to abandon the lost sheep, not to seek them out and to call them back to the Lord. And so the condemnation that God gave through Ezekiel now falls on the Pharisees:

Thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

The Good News is that Jesus has come to fulfil the prophecy. He is the Son of David come to seek and save the lost, to shepherd the sheep, and to feed them in the rich pasture of his kingdom. He has sought us out too and invites us to his Table this morning and offers us his very self in the bread and wine. But how do we come to this celebration? We profess to be his people. We profess to be his disciples, his followers, but what kind of attitude do we have to his ministry in the world around us? Notice the difference between the kinds of banquets Jesus attended. When he sat down to eat with tax collectors and sinners, when he sat down to eat with those who had been lost, but had been found, those banquets were celebrations of the love of God for sinners and of the grace given through his Son, Jesus. But when Jesus sat down to eat with the Pharisees, those banquets quickly went sour as the Pharisees used the occasion to point fingers at Jesus and to condemn him for showing grace to sinners.

Brothers and sisters, as we come to the Table this morning to feast with the Lord, what sort of attitude do we have towards the grace of God? Maybe our wrong thinking doesn’t play out right here—maybe it plays out as we leave this place and interact with people out in the world, but does this banquet lead us to celebrate the grace of God in our own lives and motivate us to share that grace with other sinners? Or do we miss the point of the Lord’s Supper and forget that we were once sinners too? Do we take this as a sign of privilege and as a sign of our own superiority as the Jews did with their own sacraments, and condemn the world rather than share God’s grace with it?

It’s interesting that in the gnostic pseudo-gospel of Thomas, the parable was changed. In that telling of the story, the shepherd explains to the lost sheep that he sought it out because he loved it, he valued it more than the others.² We’re prone to twisting the story the same way in our own minds—thinking that we’ve been invited here to the Table because we deserved to be. But that’s not the story Jesus tells. The one sheep that was lost was no more valuable than the other ninety-nine. The one coin lost was no different than all the others. In fact, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, which follows them, the son who was lost was a complete twit and many people justly wonder why his father didn’t simply write him off. The only difference between the one and the ninety-nine and the one and the ten is that the one was lost. Brothers and sisters, we are not here because we’ve earned God’s love. We’re here by his grace. We are here because he rejoices in redeeming sinners. Over sixteen-hundred years ago, St. Ambrose preached on this passage saying, “Let us rejoice that the sheep that had strayed in Adam is lifted on Christ. The shoulders of Christ are the arms of the cross. There, I laid down my sins. I rested on the neck of that noble yoke.”³

Jesus upset the Pharisees because he made manifest on earth the reality of heaven. He revealed that the Lord is a God who loves his enemies and desires to save them. We pray the words from Jesus’

prayer: “on earth as in heaven”. How do we follow Jesus in living that out? How do we manifest heaven here on earth? What can we do to show the world around us that our God is a God who loves us impartially and without measure and has sent his own Son to die that sinners may be forgiven and that the lost may be found?

Let us pray: Loving and gracious Father, we acknowledge in today’s collect that our deeds are worth nothing without love. Help us to grasp your deep, deep love for sinners and the grace you pour out on us. Remind us of the joy in your courts over sinners who were lost, but are now found in your grace. And, Father, helps us to love sinners as you have loved us and show us ways in which we can make that heavenly reality known here on earth. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

² Gospel of Thomas 107.

³ Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 7.209, cited in Arthur A. Just, Jr., ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Luke* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 244.