

Let's Celebrate! (Luke 15:1-10)

(Pastor Hubert Den Draak, Pinegrove, Jan. 24, 2016)

Quick question: who has heard the parables of the lost sheep and the woman who lost a coin many times before today? For many of us they're probably among the most familiar parables. But what are they about...?

When I was in Sunday school, I was taught that it was about that you had to repent your sins so Jesus would save you so you would go to heaven. And if you didn't repent those sins, well, I hope you enjoy fire and brimstone 'cause that's where you're headed. And I suspect a lot of people still think that way.

But if we take that Sunday school lens away and read what's really there, you'll notice that they don't talk about "sin", but about *being lost*. It's about being lost and getting found - and the joy that comes with it.

Sure, the word "sin" comes in at the beginning, but it's being used by the righteous religious folks, who consider the people Jesus is hanging out with as sinners (prostitutes, tax collectors, the sick and the poor). They use the word "sinner" to indicate those who are not as religious as they are (something a lot of modern-day Christians are good at, too...).

Even the apostle Luke wasn't too sure about what Jesus meant and tagged on this little moral conclusion "there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents...", something you won't hear Jesus say in other parts of the Bible where this story is also told.

But if we read closer, Jesus says, I'm not talking about sinners, I'm talking about the *lost*. That something very different. These parables are about sheep, a coin! Not much sense about a sheep or a coin repenting their sins, is there? The sheep is lost because, well, it's a sheep. Sheep wander off, get distracted by patches of grass, by sounds. A sheep also can get lost because it's shunned, because it's no longer welcome in the herd. Lost...

The coin is lost because of circumstances beyond its control. It just slipped out of the woman's hand and gets lost. So many people are lost because of circumstances beyond their control; just think of the Syrian refugees who are lost because of a war that they never wanted but happened anyway. Lost...

I'm pretty sure that everyone here knows all too what it feels like to be lost in life. When you get to a point in your life when nothing you know or experienced before is of any help.

Like, when you get laid off after decades of hard and dedicated work. When your child or spouse develops a mental illness and is no longer the person you once

knew. When you lose most of your life savings in an economic crash. When someone you love dies, a parent, your spouse, a close friend. You feel lost...

In Jesus' time, the religious people would tell you that it's God punishing you for something you or your parents or grandparents had done wrong. And I still encounter people who believe that God actually makes them suffer, that God sends them this misery for some divine reason. And who are they to question God, right?

But Jesus says, No! that's not what God is like. Let me tell you a story about what God *really* is like: God is like a shepherd, a crazy shepherd who parks his sheep in the middle of the desert to find the one sheep that's gone missing. Or God is like this woman with her broom, looking for a valuable silver coin and who will not stop until she finds it.

(By the way, people in that time would've been flabbergasted to hear God compared to a smelly shepherd, or a lowly woman - people who were at the bottom of society with no voice or power. That alone was pretty shocking to hear!)

And Jesus says, God is sort of like that. It's something, someone, some force, some Love - that is will not quit searching for you. There are other familiar metaphors for God: God like a parent, a mom or dad who will never stop loving you. Or a bride or groom who is totally smitten with you.

We're loved and beloved, and there's nothing we can do to stop that (and there's nothing we ever did to deserve that, either). Yes we may be lost, even when we're not aware of it ourselves, but each of us have something special, a unique gift that God sees. And God will not give up until God finds it and lifts it up and make it part of the bigger plan that God has with this creation. Like a thread that is a small but essential part of a big and beautiful tapestry. God's creation will not be complete until each and every thread has been found and woven into the *new* creation: God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. *That's* why God is searching for us. And the Good News is that we will be found. Being found is the essence of this story - and of our faith.

And this repentance thing? That's not a requirement to be found. Repentance happens *after* we are found. You are found, accepted, embraced and brought home. When that happens, how can you not be grateful and delighted, how can you not go "wow! this is amazing- Amazing grace!".

Being found changes your life. It's when you look back on what came before and you "repent", you realize that you were headed the wrong direction, "what was I thinking?". *That* is the repentance that Jesus is talking about here: it's not about remorse and beating yourself up as a miserable sinner. Repentance is about the insight and change of heart that comes *after* being found and accepted for who you are. It changes you fundamentally, it turns your life around. You become a new person and you celebrate, there is *joy*.

And the parable ends on that same high note: there is joy - not so much in heaven, although probably there, too, but importantly: joy down here on earth. Both the shepherd and the woman (and remember, they are symbolic for God) both find what they were looking for, and are so joyful about it they're shouting it off the rooftops. Look what I found! Let's have a party! Let's celebrate!

Which is exactly what two guys in Victoria B.C. did. One day they were having coffee in their favourite café when they started talking about the many joys in their lives. And they realized that God's love and joy go together, and that joy and celebration also go together. So how did they celebrate? By getting up and doing a silly spur-of-the-moment happy dance, right there in the coffee shop.

And what happened? Did people laugh at them? No! In fact, the opposite happened: everyone *joined* them in that silly dance. And that gave them the idea to do this not just once - but as much as possible.

Their recommendation: every morning when you get up, think of something joyful that you want to celebrate - and then do... this!

(show video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9z2ELaBVJY&list=PL3970493001702C2F>)

The big question, though, is: how will we respond to this joyful God who finds us...? Will we rejoice, too...? Are our lives bubbling over with joy, as we saw in that "secret ingredient experiment" this morning? When people talk to you, do they ever say, wow, what is it with you? You're so... positive! What's your... secret ingredient? And I hope you can whole-heartedly say: my secret ingredient is my faith in a God who turns lives around.

Or when outsiders look at Pinegrove UC, can they see God's joy in everything we do? We're often so work-oriented, we feel we can't really afford to celebrate. We can even feel lost in this time of great changes and turmoil; we're frantically busy trying to figure out what to do next. There's so much work to be done (and so many committees to report back to)... It's easy to forget *why* we're here.

This parable is an invitation to trust that there is a power, a love we call "God" that is searching for us, that will hold and support each of us individually - and as a community. We will be found, not just once, but over and over again. And every time it happens, celebrate! Do a silly dance, laugh, sing, hug - but celebrate, just like God does!

Amen.