

GOD'S LOST AND FOUND PARTY

Luke 15:1-20 & 1 Timothy 1:12-17

One of our parishioners donated this needlepoint picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd carrying a lost little lamb back into the fold. I hope that we can hang this picture in one of our newly renovated classrooms or the new nursery. Who would not want to be in the position of that cute cuddly lamb snuggled down on Jesus' shoulders. As a verse in the beloved hymn *The King of love my shepherd is* proclaims,

*Perverse and foolish oft I strayed
but yet in love he sought me.
and on his shoulder gently laid
and home rejoicing brought me*

These are some of the Almighty's favorite things

I don't know much about bringing home lost sheep but I do have a runaway dog. *Birdie* our English Setter loves to sneak out the door if it's left ajar or if she manages to get off the leash. When she does she's off and running. I can call for her till I'm blue in the face and she may even come back into the yard to tease me, then she's off again like a flash. We know from experience that she'll come home, in about 4 hours. Then I'll carry her in, but I probably won't be rejoicing, as I carry a filthy wet dog coated in sticks and burrs up to the bathtub to wash and groom her. I'm always glad to have found her but I'm usually too grumpy about her having run away in the first place to do too much rejoicing.

I lost my wallet several months back. I racked my brain to think where I could have left it and realized that I must have left it on the counter of the pharmacy. I called CVS and sure enough they found my wallet. They kept it in their safe for me. They were so nice about it and nothing was missing. They wouldn't even accept a token of thanks for keeping it safe. I was delighted to have my wallet back and not have to cancel credit cards, etc. But it never once occurred to me to throw a party.

Lost coin found party; only in the Bible. Only in the Bible does a shepherd leave 99 healthy sheep to find one stray. Only in the Bible does heaven throw a party for every sinner who returns to God. Only in the Bible do heavenly choirs sing for poor shepherds. Only in the Bible does a peasant girl bear the Son of God. Only in the Bible do the poor have their belly full while the rich go away empty. Only in the Bible are the humble exalted while the exalted are humbled. Only in the Bible is the Lord of heaven and earth emptied of all power in order to share our humanity. Only in the Bible does God throw a party for everyone who has been lost and now is found.

Through his teachings and parables Jesus tells us the sorts of things that give God pleasure.

When the lost are found
When the broken are healed
When the alienated are reconciled
When the sick are made well
When those who are dead are made alive

When the oppressed go free
When the prisoner is released
When the humble have been exalted

Who was Jesus telling this story to? (Yes) the Scribes Pharisees who so thoroughly disapproved of the rif-raff Jesus hung out with. They grumbled that Jesus ate with sinners. And Jesus' response to their disapproval is something like, '*Yes, isn't it wonderful. Nothing could make God happier!*' In fact he told them, "*there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.*"

- More joy over the tax collector who repents than over 99 Pharisees.
- More delight over the prostitute who repents than over 99 scribes.
- More rejoicing over the drug dealer who repents than over 99 clean-and-sober Christians
- More happiness over the career criminal who repents than over 99 law-abiding Americans

It doesn't sound so good does it when we apply it to ourselves? However we need to remember who we are.

In writing to his friend Timothy the Apostle Paul wrote, "*the saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost.*" The flock from which Jesus goes out to search for the lost is not made up of 99 perfect sheep, but rather 99 lost sheep who have already been found. At our best we are all lost sinners who have been found in Jesus' love. God rejoices in your and my ongoing redemption as much as he rejoices in the redemption of a more obvious or public sinner.

I was eating lunch at PF Chang's yesterday and I saw a t-shirt that struck me apropos to today's gospel. The back of the man's t-shirt read, "*the 45 P's of Marketing: Price, Product, Place, Promotion, PARTY.*" And I suppose if you get the marketing right there is something to celebrate; there is a celebration. It made me think that there are 4, no 5 Spiritual Laws. (My version of the 4 spiritual laws is a little softened from the version handed out in tracks, but the basic point is the same).

1. God loves you and has a plan for your life
2. Human beings are sinful and separated from God. No matter how hard we try we can't make ourselves right and whole by our own efforts.
3. Jesus Christ died for our sins to set us free. He defeated death itself in order to give us new life (abundant life) in him.
4. We need to receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior
5. **PARTY!**

In fact that's what we're doing right now; we're having a party! We need to remember that each week as we come together to break bread and drink wine and celebrate God's love given us in Jesus, we're having a party! We've come together for a **great *thanksgiving***. What do we call the priest who officiates at Holy Communion? A *celebrant*, and that's because we have something to *celebrate*; we're having *celebration*. The Eucharistic feast is a celebration of our release from slavery, our healing from blindness, of our being lost and then found. It is a foretaste of that great messianic banquet we will celebrate with God and all the saints at the end of the age.

And so, Jesus' message to us today is the same message he gave to the Scribes and Pharisees. *Rejoice!* Rejoice because you were lost and now you are found in God's love. Rejoice because God seeks you out. Rejoice because God continues to seek out the lost, continues to search everywhere for them and bring them home rejoicing. Rejoice in this great feast where we join with our seeking God whose very mission is to restore all people to unity with himself and each other in Christ. And join in the heavenly celebration for every lost and broken soul who begins the journey to restoration, healing, wholeness and one's true home. Amen.