

Luke 15:1-10  
September 15, 2019

“God Rejoices!”

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My Cousin’s dog, Erin, ran away earlier this week and was gone for more than a day. Facebook posts were filled with concern, offers to help with the search, and simply sharing the fear experienced when a four-legged child is on the loose.

A day later the good news came, Erin had been found, safe and unharmed, mom and dad were able to secure the 4-legged escapee and return her to her loving home.

We know what it is like to lose something, it is one of our least favorite feelings.

So once the good news of Erin’s return was announced on social media, hundreds of comments began rolling in... ‘So glad, yay, thank goodness, Hooray, great news, yay... God is good, OMG what a relief, oh Hallelujah,’ and many more.

In today’s parables a shepherd and a woman have something to teach us. These two characters search diligently, we might say recklessly, to find a lost sheep and a lost coin. At the end of these parables, we hear these lines, “rejoice with me, for I have found the sheep that was lost... rejoice with me for I have found the coin I had lost.” We sense God grinning ear to ear, rejoicing for the treasure that was lost, has been found!

In Jesus’ parables, we might expect God to punish the lost sheep, or the person who lost the valuable coin. Some of us have the idea God is an “I caught ya God” sitting far away ready to pounce on our mistakes and punish our sins. But these parables depict God as an “I found ya God!” who rejoices as God’s treasured people are drawn closer into fellowship and followership with Jesus Christ.

Let’s pause a moment... You are one of God’s treasures. You are precious to God. You are worthy of being loved. If you become lost God would spare no less resources than are exerted in these parables in order to find you. The Apostle Paul writes, you are “fearfully and wonderfully made;” in another place he writes, “you are God’s temple and God’s Spirit dwells in you.”

As God’s treasure, when we resist temptation, God rejoices! When we go the extra mile to help someone, God rejoices! When we are abundantly generous, or welcome a stranger, or learn about those different from us, or care for the earth, God rejoices!

In the beginning of the story we hear the Pharisees grumbling because they didn’t know what to do about Jesus; he broke traditions and laws which maintained the status quo; keeping those in power, in power; and keeping those who were down and out, down and out. In response to their grumbling... Our Savior tells these parables about a shepherd and a Woman who broke the

status quo in the name of a God who seeks relationship with all parts of creation, those in power and those down and out. A God who is reconciling all creation in love.

Along the way Jesus had been uncovering how the patterns of life in his day created unfair expectations that everyone would give and take in equal measure. In Luke 6 he says, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you, for even those known as 'sinners' love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even the sinner does the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? For sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again." Jesus knew those down and out could never keep up with those in power, in that type of system more and more people would get left out.

Yet, as we begin considering alternative systems, they seem to be asking the people who are resourceful to put in more than a fair share. That's frightening. I am thankful that if I have a little glitch in my income one month, I can raid a small rainy-day fund, or cut back on expenses, or lean on family to help me through. The safety net many of us have seems to work best in a world of give and take in equal measure. Is God asking us to be some sort of Robinhood?

A 1990's Hip Hop Song Mr. Wendal began helped me think differently about Jesus' message. The song is about a friendship one band member Speech develops with a street bum. Speech says, 'Now that I know him, to give him money isn't charity. He gives me some knowledge; I buy him some shoes.'

Is it possible we may have spiritual hungers and soul yearnings, which cannot be solved by our rainy-day fund? What have we lost by being loyal participants in civilization?

On sabbatical this summer I was able to rest, and feast, and fest... I was able to leave my phone at home sometimes. I was able to visit family often and see friends I haven't seen in a long time, one friend I hadn't seen in nearly 40 years (last time was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade if you are counting). Also, I was able to make a good dent in the stacks of books we clergy tend to buy, but don't have time to complete.

One of the books offered some startling information. More than half of Americans report having no close confidants or friends outside of their immediate family. Drawing on evidence from more than a half million interviews researchers discovered we sign fewer petitions, belong to fewer organizations that meet, know our neighbors less, meet with friends less frequently, and even socialize with family less often. This is a sign of something lost. Have we lost touch with our self, with others, with God?

The author of that book points to some tragic trends resulting when these treasures are lost; increase in bitterness and incivility, dramatic declines in caring for the most vulnerable, a loss of concern for the education of anyone's children other than our own, and an unwillingness to address long term issues like the environment. Those are symptoms of parched spirits and hungry souls yearning to find our way, yearning to sense God rejoicing in us. And before you

conclude that I am on a political rant here, the book was published 8 years ago containing research beginning in the mid-1980's.

Feeding our souls, igniting our spirits... this too is a kind of lostness that, when found, brings God to rejoice in us. Building and renewing community and relationship with one another, with ourselves, and the earth... no rainy-day fund can buy this - yet it is deeply worth searching for, and when found it brings God to rejoice!

We are called to travel the path to found-ness, to build relationships, to seek and care for all God's treasures; to become a vital part of the fabric of God's kingdom which invites all of creation to be immersed in God's un-repayable, un-reimbursable love. So we too can experience the joy of hearing God say, "So glad, yay, thank goodness, Hooray, great news, yay... I am good, OMG what a relief, oh Hallelujah,"

Amen