

Exodus 32:7-14
Psalm 51:1-10
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

Sermon for September 11, 2022

OUR FATHER'S JOY
By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: We are one in Christ Jesus.

The fifteenth chapter of Luke's gospel pulls together three of Christ's parables that all have a common theme, the recovery of something that has been lost. The first two of the parables are what we read in our lectionary reading this morning, and they've come to be known as the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. The third is the famous and wonderful parable of the prodigal son, with which we're all familiar.

Luke begins his account very helpfully by telling us the occasion on which Jesus offered these parables. Let me read the first three verses again.

Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So he spoke this parable to them, saying...

and at that point Jesus offers the parable of the lost sheep.

It's important, I think, to take note of the fact that Luke emphasizes that the tax collectors and sinners were coming to hear Jesus. That is to say, they were hearing something in what Jesus was teaching that drew them to him, and made them want to hear more, and what the Pharisees and scribes objected to was that Jesus allowed them to come into and remain in his presence.

A little background may help make it clear why the Pharisees and scribes were upset.

The Jewish tax collectors were perhaps the most morally despised category of people in all of occupied Israel. Why? Just because they were collecting taxes? No. Because they were collecting taxes from the occupying Romans.

Back when I ran a business, I was once audited by the IRS. Even though my auditor was pleasant (and attractive), it was an unnerving and unpleasant experience. But at no point to I resent or despise the auditor herself; she was, after all, simply doing her job of seeing that the laws of our country were being adhered to, the country that I was proud and fortunate to call my own, and which had enabled me to have the life and liberty that I enjoyed.

But imagine that she had been an agent, not of my own country, but of some foreign power that had conquered my country. Imagine that she was ensuring that I paid taxes, not to support my own country, but some other country altogether, in fact, a hated and feared enemy country. And suppose on top of that that she was getting rich herself by collecting those taxes, because she received a hefty percentage of whatever she collected from me.

Well, that's what the tax collectors that are often mentioned in the New Testament did. Because they were so despised by the native Jews for working for the Romans, the Romans paid them extremely well to do so. The tax collectors not only collected money for the Romans, but they became rich for doing so. They were thus hated for their treachery and resented for their wealth.

Well, that was one group that were drawn to Jesus,

And as for the other group, the so-called sinners, who were they? The word 'sinners' suggest to our ears someone who engages in immoral practices, like criminals or prostitutes or adulterers, but that's not what it meant to the Pharisees and the scribes. In their vocabulary, it primarily referred to people who engaged in professions that rendered them ritually unclean, and therefore unfit for association with regular people, unfit for holding public office, unfit even to attend religious services in the temple. Tax-collectors were one such people, but so were street vendors, butchers and tanners, grave-diggers, and many others, including, interestingly, shepherds. These were people whose very jobs brought them into contact with people or animals or circumstances that made them ritually unclean, and, of course, anyone who came into contact or associated with any of them became ritually unclean as well.

And those were also the kinds of people who were drawn to Jesus, to hear him speak and teach. And worse yet, Jesus welcomed them into his presence, even sat down and shared their ritually unclean food with them.

For the Pharisees and scribes of the age and culture in which Jesus lived, the world was basically divided into two camps: the clean and the unclean, the insiders and the outsiders. The insiders were those who adhered to the many religious laws of the nation, the outsiders those who did not. Anyone who was not a Jew was by definition unclean; but also many who were genetically Jews, but whose life styles rendered them unclean: those were the sinners.

It was to people who lived and thought and adhered to that insider/outsider dichotomy that Jesus offered the instruction of his two parables: the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin.

In both parables, what's important to note is that the final emphasis is not on joy of the item being recovered, but on the joy of those who recover the items. The shepherd finds his lost sheep, but the emphasis is not on how happy the sheep is to be found. It's on the great joy of the shepherd and the villagers to whom the shepherd carries the lost sheep back.

And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!"

And then Jesus tells the Pharisees and scribes the moral of the parable: *I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.*

And similarly with the lost coin: The coin is obviously not happy to have been found. Or sad, or anything else. It's a coin, for goodness sake. It's the woman and her friends who matter.

And when she has found it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I lost!"

And Jesus then draws the same moral for the Pharisees and scribes:

"Likewise I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

The great revelation that Jesus brought to the Jewish religion of his time and place was that God takes no joy in exclusion, in separation, in enforcing the insider/outsider dichotomy. Such exclusion is not a reflection of God's nature, it is on the contrary a violation of God's nature.

The shepherd in fact goes out into the rough and dangerous and lonely countryside and hunts for the lost sheep. The woman lights a candle in her windowless little hovel and sweeps the straw-covered floor in the darkness until she finds her coin.

God became incarnate in the human life of Jesus of Nazareth to reveal himself to his world, and Jesus provides that revelation of God's nature both in his teaching and in his manner of living. In his manner of living, he eats with tax collectors and sinners. And then in his teaching, he gives us two parables, the point of which is that God will go to any length, will risk any danger, will make any sacrifice, to recover those who are lost, and bring them back to Him.

God does not rejoice in separation: he hates it. He doesn't seek separation: he tears down the walls of separation. His joy is not in despising or looking down on outsiders; his joy is in forgiving them, and welcoming them back into his family. And he sent Jesus into the world to make that complete and total reuniting possible.

Paul returns to this point again and again. In his letter to the Galatians, he writes:

For you are all children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. [Therefore] There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3: 26-28)

So what do these two little parables mean for us. As always, it is of vital importance to remember that although Jesus tailored his instruction to the circumstances of his particular audience, the instruction is intended for all audiences, of any time and place.

In the world and culture within which we live, we don't have any particular religious animus towards tax-collectors and shepherds and butchers. But if we are honest, mustn't we admit that we still retain the animus towards outsiders, towards those who are not of our flock, to those who aren't as good as we are?

In our daily lives, don't we sometimes find pleasure, even joy, in the condemnation of others; in our social communication and even in the privacy of our own daily reflection, our internal dialogue, don't we relish criticizing and finding fault in others, don't we reap psychological reward in examining with exquisite attention their shortcomings and failures and mistakes; don't we spend an inordinate amount of our time and energy and intelligence in diagnosing what's wrong with everyone except ourselves; don't we pride ourselves in examining the mote in someone else's eye?

Even in our established Christian religion throughout most of its history, the tortures of eternal damnation for those outside our fold are regarded with as much religious respect and religious approval as the blissful rewards of heaven for those who remain within the fold.

But the shepherd whose sheep went astray didn't regard **it** as a lost cause, didn't abandon it to the wolves and the bears and the starvation of the wilderness; the shepherd went out and scoured the countryside for the one who was lost. And when he found it, he rejoiced. The woman didn't go out and buy another coin, perhaps a newer and shinier coin; she lit a candle and swept the floor, and when she found her old coin, she rejoiced.

God's greatest joy, perhaps – if I may make the suggestion with reverence – His only joy, is to forgive his children, and welcome them home, and Jesus' one and only motivation is to add to His father's joy. That we may come to share that motivation, and give it ever and ever greater place in the way we lead our daily lives, Gracious God, is our prayer this morning, and we pray in Jesus's name.