

Sermon: Everyone's Invited
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Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
September 11, 2022

Scripture

Luke 15: 1-10

15 Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

⁸ 'Or what woman having ten silver coins, * if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

Sermon: Everyone's Invited

My dog, Mattie, loves to run around the neighborhood. Now, she is less spry than she used to be, but when she was younger she would try to take advantage of someone visiting as they were coming into or leaving the house – which often involved keeping the door open longer than usual. In that time, Mattie would try to escape. If she succeeded, she would run around the neighborhood - up and down the street or through the various back yards. I would drive or walk around the neighborhood looking for her, whistling, calling her name. She would come back, eventually. Sometimes she would even run up the driveway, look at me, and then run off again - as if to tease me. Over time, I learned that she would come back when she was ready.

Except for one memorable occasion. On that particular evening, my daughter and granddaughter, who was an infant at the time, had been visiting. They had stayed for supper and when they were leaving it was dark. So I brought Mattie out on her leash when I walked my daughter out to her car.

As I was saying good bye and my daughter was driving away, Mattie saw a rabbit. Now, I had not seen the rabbit. And if I did not know about the rabbit, how could I be prepared when my dog decided to take off after it? I couldn't. So when my dog decided to chase that rabbit, she pulled the leash from my hand. Now Mattie is a black dog. And since it was dark out, I quickly lost sight of her. Despite running in the direction she ran, I could not find her. And she did not come back.

I spent most of that evening and that night searching for my dog- driving up and down the street, walking through neighbors' back yards, even climbing over brush and through bushes. I was worried that she might run into the road, not be seen because she was black and get hit by a car. I was also afraid that her leash might have gotten tangled up in something and she could get trapped – stuck wherever she was. Or maybe she had a run in with one of the foxes or coyotes in the woods. To make things worse, it was thundering and lightening and my dog is petrified of thunder. It was awful.

When 6 am came, I called my daughters and they came over to help me look for my dog. And as my daughters, their husbands and I were combing the neighborhood, a woman who lived a few houses up the street from me came out of her house. We asked her if she had seen my dog. She said that she had. She said my dog had become tangled in their garden the evening before. Her dog had started barking. And when the lady went out, she found my dog. She brought my dog into her house because the weather was threatening. My dog had been warm and cozy all night.

I was so relieved that she was ok. I would have loved to have a grand breakfast for everyone – coffee and donuts or whatever – to celebrate! But I didn't actually throw a celebration, because I had to go to work. But I was so grateful that she was home, safe and sound. Mattie had been found.

In Jesus' parables, finding the lost is reason to celebrate. And in this morning's gospel, Jesus shares stories about the lost and found. And, as with Jesus' other parables, there's more to Jesus' stories of the shepherd and his sheep and the woman and her coin.

We first hear that "all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen." Jesus was developing quite an audience. And the Pharisees are not happy that Jesus is attracting so many people, especially this crowd. In fact, they are grumbling that Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus is actually taking time to share a meal with them.

I imagine the Pharisees' conversation could sound something like this.

"Did you see that Jesus? There he goes again. He is eating with those tax collectors. It is bad enough that he invited himself to Zachaeus' house for dinner. But now he is eating with a whole bunch of them. And you know those tax collectors. They work for the Romans and on top of it they all are cheats. How could Jesus do that? Yes, and he is dining with those other sinners too. You never know who you will see Jesus with."

The Pharisees were grumbling. They didn't get it. They just did not understand Jesus.

So Jesus, rather than confront the Pharisees, engaged them in a story. Jesus did not confront those who grumbled against him, he told them a story. Hmm, what if we did that today when we disagreed? What if when we disagreed with another, rather than grumbling, we shared our stories? That's an interesting question.

But back to Jesus.

Jesus actually told 3 stories that day - about losing and finding, the lost and the found, and about the celebration that ensued. But today we will concentrate on two.

The first story was about a shepherd who was willing to leave a flock of 99 sheep to seek one that had strayed, lost its way. Now, just imagine that you are standing on a hillside looking out over 100 sheep. Can you imagine what 100 sheep look like? I thought about trying to find a picture of 100 of any thing just to give an idea of how many that is. But I don't have one. So I ask you to imagine that great number. Now, imagine realizing that one sheep is gone. One sheep in one hundred. Just One. How do you think you could tell that one out of 100 was missing? That could be pretty difficult.

But the shepherd in Jesus' story knew. So that observant, devoted shepherd— he would have had to have been observant and devoted to realize that one sheep was gone - went off to find his sheep. And once he found it, rather than shooing it back to the herd, he picked it up, put it over his shoulders, and carried it back. He embraced that lost one. Then he wanted to celebrate.

That shepherd, and you know that Jesus is talking about God, was so thrilled to have found that one lost sheep, that he decided to throw a party. He was not chiding that sheep for running off. He was not grumbling to the other shepherds about what a chore and nuisance it was to seek his sheep. He was celebrating that it was found. The shepherd did the seeking and called others to rejoice with him. That means God does the seeking and then rejoices when the lost one is found. And God calls others to rejoice with him. We are invited to rejoice....

Then there's the story of the woman who lost a silver coin. She had 10 silver coins. This coin was valuable, even if she had 9 others. The coin was probably a drachma and worth about the same as one sheep. So it was worth looking for. The woman searched high and low for her coin. Maybe she swept under the bed. Maybe she lifted the sofa cushions. Maybe she looked in all her pockets. We don't know where the coin ended up, but at last she found her coin.

When the woman found her coin, she wanted to celebrate. She called her friends and neighbors together. That sounds like a party to me. Now, we do not hear that she had to get a husband's permission to throw a party when she found that lost coin. The money was hers. The woman simply decided to gather her friends to help her celebrate. So like some of Jesus' female followers who had been supporting him, she must have been a woman of means.

Getting back to the story, as you know, that woman is God too. God is female in this story. Jesus describes God as female. So this feminine God is calling her neighbors to celebrate with her. What was lost is found! That is a reason to celebrate.

Now let's get back to Jesus. In our reading, Jesus is sitting with tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees are there too, grumbling. They cannot see that Jesus is welcoming those people who are considered lost, those who don't fit in. He is sharing a meal and conversation. Maybe the lost ones have wandered away, like the sheep. Maybe they were lost because someone lost them – like a woman losing a coin. A coin does not wander away. It gets lost. Sometimes people get lost because they feel pushed away.

However Jesus is eating with those who were considered lost, listening to them, talking to them, welcoming them and loving them. If the Pharisees could not understand Jesus' openness, welcome, and love, then it would be hard for them to celebrate.

And if the Pharisees were indignantly standing there with their arms folded closely across their chests, and their minds and hearts closed and Jesus had tried to explain what he was doing, they might not have listened. So Jesus told them these parables, stories, so they might listen and to make them think.

We too are called to think about these parables. We have to be careful when we think about the lost and sinners. And we have to be careful when we think about the Pharisees. We have to be careful, because we are all lost, we are all sinners. We all stray from the way of Jesus. We have all sinned – doing things that separate us from God and our neighbor.

But perhaps we are all Pharisees as well. The Pharisees saw themselves as righteous. Because they saw themselves as righteous, they might not have seen themselves as sinners. That's a trap that's easy to fall into. If we see ourselves as righteous we might see ourselves as better than others – those with whom we disagree or those who are dependent on the assistance of organizations or the state. And we fail to see ourselves as the sinners that we are.

Jesus told the Pharisees, the righteous, about the lost, that God goes to great ends to find the lost, the sinners. And God celebrates when the lost one is found. Jesus showed the lost and the Pharisees this by welcoming sinners, by sharing a meal, by breaking bread with them, and by loving them.

As Christians, we admit that we are sinners. We believe that our God will come find us. And she will celebrate when she does. And we believe that "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents," whether that sinner is a Pharisee or a tax collector. That is good news.

And, as followers of Jesus, as sinners who are loved by God, we are called to reach out to one another and to welcome other sinners. We are called to find them when they are lost and invite them to our tables. And when they accept our invitation, we are called to celebrate together, to rejoice, and to love one another.

And God, God is there. Actually, God is the one is inviting all of us to the party.

Now, after worship today, we will actually be breaking bread together – enjoying our Rally Day brunch as a church family. But there are some in our congregation who cannot be with us.

These individuals are not lost. But they physically cannot be with us today. Still, they are loved and their presence is missed. With that in mind, I invite you to take a card and write a note in it – remind the person that as we celebrate Rally Day, we, the members of Olivet, miss them and are praying for them. Even though they cannot be with us today, they are in our hearts.

As Christians, may we be eager to welcome and to love one another, by reaching out to the lost and to those we know and love. And may we always celebrate that extravagant love of Jesus.