

Sermon on Luke 15:1-10

September 11, 2022: Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone

“Joy is the Point”



*“Being found is at the root of a new understanding that you are welcome. A new understanding that you count. A new understanding that you are part of God’s story. A new understanding that your presence is cause for joy.”*

What have you been grumbling about this week?

If you haven’t been grumbling at all, that’s great. But if you just need some inspiration, let me help you out.

How about political ads?

Pharmaceutical ads? Increasingly inappropriate spam text messages? I

have grumbled about mold on the cheese I just opened. I have grumbled because the medicine that does the best job clearing my congestion also keeps me awake at night.

And if I were there listening to these two parables Jesus tells today, I might be among the grumblers. I might be grumbling about impractical searches for lost things and impractical responses to found things.

But then I would miss Jesus’ point entirely.

Last week Jesus cautioned us about those things that might distract us from being full-time followers. He told us how discipleship is demanding. But he didn’t tell us there’s no joy in it. This week, Jesus paints a picture of some of those things that

might distract us from the joy of following Jesus, the joy of participating in God's reign. Things like failure to understand what counts. Failure to realize these stories are about us, too. Failure to grasp why simply being found is such a big deal.

These distractions can easily lead us to miss the point, and to miss the joy.

Our inability to understand what counts might distract us from the joy that God intends.

A line I read this week sums it up nicely: "It is much easier to count items than to know what counts." The author, Kate Bowler, isn't writing about Jesus' parables. She's writing about a diagnosis of Stage 4 colon cancer and contemplating the wisdom of a bucket list, that enumeration of things to do before you die.

And she writes: "It is much easier to count items than to know what counts."

I suspect it's also much easier to count sheep and coins than to know what counts. I'm no shepherd, but leaving 99 sheep to go after one seems foolish. Who's keeping track of the 99? Who's keeping them wandering off into the wilderness? And a party? To celebrate one sheep being found? Um, what's on the menu for this party? Some kind of meat, I presume?

A party to celebrate a found coin makes no sense to me, either. This coin would have been worth about a day's wages for a laborer. I'll tell you now, if I find a lost paycheck, I'm not spending it on a party. Do not expect an invitation.

But Jesus is not focused on counting things. Jesus is focused on what counts. And what counts is each and every sheep. Each and every child of God. Including me. Including you.

So if you are tempted to grumble because Jesus would leave you behind to go out looking for someone else, know that Jesus would leave them behind to look for you, too. And he would throw a party for you, too. Because in God's kingdom, there is abundant joy when the lost are found.

If we can't understand that these stories are about us, too, we miss the point. We miss the joy.

Who are you in this scripture story? Which person or character do you relate to?

Maybe you are standing off with the Pharisees and scribes, arms crossed, skeptical of God's lavish welcome. After all, the sheep and the coin do nothing to deserve an elaborate search. Nothing to deserve a party. And the tax collectors and sinners might well still be collecting taxes and sinning. Can you believe that God's unmerited favor toward them is good news for you, too?

Maybe you are feeling lost. Here, but not really here. Present, but not sure you belong. Can you believe that Jesus would drop everything to seek you out and assure you that your presence is worth celebrating?

Or maybe you have lost someone. Maybe someone you love has stopped coming to worship, stopped following Jesus, stopped returning your calls. Maybe you have left other people and priorities behind in your single-minded focus on the one who is lost. Can you believe that God is searching and seeking even more relentlessly than you are?

Pharisees and scribes and tax collectors and sinners and Lutherans and whole congregations all get lost sometimes. We lose our focus on God's reign. We wander off from following Jesus. Or we just get distracted by the shiny things this world dangles in front of us.

Getting lost - and getting found - is something that happens not just to "them" but to "us," too. When we understand that, our capacity to celebrate grows. We can celebrate whenever someone returns to the fold, whatever the circumstances. Because that's what God does. Because that's why Jesus came.

The good news for all of us is that Jesus came "to seek out and to save the lost!" And he will go to extraordinary lengths to do so. And he will celebrate lavishly every single time. There will be joy in heaven, alleluias among the angels, every

single time. Because in God's kingdom, there is abundant joy when the lost are found.

But why, we might ask?

And if we fail to grasp the significance of just being found, that, too, will cause us to miss the point, to miss the joy.

Luke writes that there will be joy in heaven and in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents. In these parables, being found is at the root of repentance. God's work, not our work, is at the heart of repentance. The sheep did not contribute to its rescue. It was found. The coin did not jump out from under a rug. It was found.

To repent is to come to a new understanding - a new understanding made possible only by God's searching and finding, by God's grace and mercy. This change of heart and mind becomes possible when one who was lost is found, welcomed into the fold, welcomed into the community. Being found is at the root of a new understanding that you are welcome. A new understanding that you count. A new understanding that you are part of God's story. A new understanding that your presence is cause for joy.

In God's kingdom, there is abundant joy when the lost are found. Because joy is the point. Practical considerations are not the point of these stories. Flocks of sheep and purses of coins are not even the point. Human effort is not the point.

This is God's work. The seeking and the finding are God's work. God's joy.

And God's joy, shared among God's people - that's the point.