

Year C, Pentecost 17
September 15th, 2013
By Thomas L. Truby
Luke 15:1-10 and 1 Timothy 1:12-17

“Come and Rejoice With Us!”

When the text says “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him,” it means the people everybody hated and those the good people wanted nothing to do with were coming near to listen to Jesus. They were approaching him with open ears. “Ichy” people we don’t want to touch and despised political collaborators with Rome were attracted to Jesus. How can this be? What makes them want to be near Jesus and why does Jesus allow it?

This peculiar behavior had not escaped the notice of the more educated and religious people in the audience and they began finding each other and gathering in little clumps to express their irritation. Even though ordinarily they were rivals to the core, they formed temporary connection by grumbling about this obnoxious behavior. “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” He associates with the riff-raff! Gross!

Jesus sees them forming little groups, turning their back toward him and then looking his way as they whisper to each other. He knows they are forming fake community by excluding those they consider bad. They think they are being religious and modeling themselves after God. This is the very thing Jesus has come to expose. He decides to tell them a story.

Jesus starts with a question. “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?” Dead silence! His question drifts into space! No one raises their hand.

If you own a hundred sheep and they are in open desert would you risk losing the ninety-nine to rescue the one? No, you wouldn’t. The idea of leaving the ninety-nine to seek the one is preposterous. No one in their right mind would do that. It would be crazy, foolish, stupid and very bad business practice. But Jesus puts it in a way that makes it sound like you should leave the ninety-nine and rescue the one.

Where is Jesus going? Already the story has an edge and the edge is sharpened when the shepherd puts the full-grown sheep on his shoulders and carries it home, rejoicing. Do you know how heavy a full-grown sheep is? They weigh nearly as much as a man. Can you imagine your average shepherd rejoicing at having to carry this sheep for miles? This is a very strange shepherd.

Then this strange shepherd does one more thing even weirder. When he gets back home he calls together his friends and neighbors and asks them to party with him in celebration at finding his one lost sheep. Shepherds were a rough lot. They were the red-necks of their culture. They were defensive, tough on the outside, smelly and course—not the sentimental sort that gets weepy about recovering one sheep. Everyone there would know this shepherd

does not match any shepherd they have ever known. They are thinking this doesn't make sense. In fact the story has taken them into a world that feels surrealistic. Using modern terms, Jesus has transported them into the world of science fiction where they are not sure of the rules and surprises can ambush you.

They were wondering where Jesus is going and now he tells them. "Just so, I tell you," says Jesus—this is Jesus' way of saying, listen up; here is the point. "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

Does that clear it up for you? There is so much here, I hardly know where to start.

Do you think joy is a category the crowd thinks much about? I suspect it is a word they don't often use. And it isn't just "joy," it is "more joy". Somewhere someone is full of more joy than you can imagine over one person repenting. Joy is a relational category and suggests delight, effervescence, and being seen with a twinkle. Joy is a three year old who lights up when they see mommy or daddy enter the room. Joy is the opposite of shame and a wonderful thing. Our tax collectors and sinners aren't used to being looked at with joyful eyes—eyes that delight in seeing them. No, they are used to being seen with dead eyes full of disdain and in response they look down in shame. They know who they are and how others view them. But Jesus looks at them differently.

Could this be what attracts the tax collectors and sinners? They sense that he likes them in a deep and joyful way even though he knows who they are. He doesn't look at them with the same eyes with which they look at themselves. They see in his face the delight the shepherd displays upon finding the one sheep he had risked all to find. When he looks at them they feel precious. Could this be why they come close and listen to him? Does he delight in them simply because they are human and not because they are good? Could this be how God looks at them too?

And where is this joy coming from? It's coming from heaven; God's place, that place radically different from our own. Our place is full of rivalry and contention, fighting and murder, heartache and pain but God's place is different. God's place is where God's rule of love is lived and those rules are quite opposite. We are only beginning to learn how they work. Heaven points toward God's coming age and how the world will work then.

And how can it be that one sinner who repents is the occasion for all this joy. God's joy, if this is about God, is not found in the group, but in the one and it's the rejected one, at that. Maybe in God's world the outcasts don't get cast out. Maybe they are welcomed.

Repentance is always about changing our minds. It's where we rethink things and come to new conclusions. It can be an "ah ha" where the pieces suddenly come together or it can be a gradual process where our world gets reconfigured—the hard drive wiped clean and new software installed. This new software is of a different order and allows us to see things we had never seen before. The joy coming from heaven celebrates the installation of new software. It is like going from black and white to radiant color on a high-definition monitor.

Is this whole story about the character of God? That might explain the strangeness of this shepherd.

And why do the ninety-nine righteous persons need no repentance. Is it true that “only those who are not good in their own eyes can allow themselves to be forgiven?” Maybe the ninety-nine righteous people like their world the way it is. They are quite happy grumbling to each other and building their pseudo-unity around the excluded “tax collectors” and “sinners”. It’s not a very joyful world but they know the rules; define them, enforce them and are their beneficiaries.

But Jesus makes it sound like the ninety-nine are missing something. Are they? To use James Alison’s term, maybe they are missing the “joy of being wrong”—the joy of discovering the overwhelming love, delight and mercy of the God of the universe.

But we move on to Jesus’ second story. When you lose a coin, do you light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until you find it? Maybe, maybe not! When you find it, do you call your friends and neighbors and ask them to rejoice with you. Probably not! This woman in her joy at finding the coin is a little over the top. But what if the coin represents finding a new way of understanding God, and therefore understanding ourselves and the whole world? Maybe it’s a theory of everything—a way of seeing that makes sense?

This is how I feel about this non-violent, non-sacrificial understanding of God that I have been sharing with you. For me it is the coin that got lost and now has been found. It is the stray sheep we must leave the ninety-nine to find; but having found it, we discover we want to call our friends and neighbors to come and celebrate with us. Our friends and neighbors look at us like we’re crazy. They don’t understand the importance of what we are discovering. With this new understanding there are no tax collectors and sinners, no missing coins, no black sheep stranded and alone. With the woman in the story I find myself exclaiming, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that has been lost” and I have looked for all my life.

I believe the church largely lost the coin 1700 years ago. But now we are finding it again. I am seeing evidence of our finding it everywhere. Even from the Pope and his advocating against violence and for reconciliation and peace. We are in a period of repentance—of changing our minds about God, about ourselves, and about our neighbor. We are discovering God is like Jesus! Do you get what that means? Do you see how that translates to a different way of looking at the world?

This is why Paul writes: *“even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence, I have received mercy...and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus”*. Paul is now on the other side of “Father forgive them; they don’t know what they are doing.” Like all humans in the process of repenting, he knows he has a dark and violent past, and that he is not as good as he once thought himself to be, but it doesn’t matter, he has received God’s mercy and this mercy is changing him.

Yes, this is the new thing into which we are being inducted week by week. The Gospel itself is the lost coin, the misplaced piece, the ninety-nine sheep that must be left in order to find the

one that has been missing. And we are in the process of finding it. No wonder we call our friends and neighbors and ask them to come and rejoice with us. Amen.