

“Rejoice With Me” GPPC 9-15-19
Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28, Luke 15:1-10

As with so much of the Bible, our story this morning begins not with comfort and peace but with conflict. Of course, conflict sometimes only brings destruction. But many times, for people of faith, God brings something new and good out of conflict, sometimes clarity about who we are and what our mission is, other times something else. It depends upon how we respond, doesn't it?

Luke says, “All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus.” Who were these people? The tax collectors were collecting for the Roman Empire. And the empire might use local folks to collect the taxes. These collectors had ample opportunity to skim extra cash for themselves. And as the dictionary says, “A strict Israelite was further offended by the fact that tax-collectors had to maintain continual contact with non-Israelites in the course of their work; this rendered an Israelite tax-collector ceremonially unclean.” (*BDAG*)

And then there were the “sinners” Luke mentions. Here, Luke does not mean “sinners” in the sense of faithful people who make mistakes

Jeff Paschal

and commit sins. Here he speaking of “sinners” in a different way, as a category of people. The dictionary says they were “irreligious, unobservant people, outsiders of those who did not observe the Law in detail and therefore were shunned by observers of traditional precepts.”

(BDAG)

You get the picture for both groups, right? Tax-collectors=sleazy, grifters, working for an occupying government, taking money from decent hard-working people. Sinners=trashy people who don't even try to follow the law, folks you wouldn't want hanging around your kids, bad influences.

And who are these two sets of moral disasters coming to listen to? Our dear, sweet Lord Jesus, of course.

Well, not to worry. The Pharisees and scribes are on the case. But who are *they* anyway? They are prestigious, the religious elite, well-educated, followers of the law. But as one scholar says, “...[T]hey represent a constant hostility to the message of liberation....Although they are defenders of the religious tradition, they interpret it in such a

Jeff Paschal

way as to appropriate its meaning for their own benefit.” (François Bovon, *Luke 2*, Hermeneia Series, 403-404.)

So the Pharisees and scribes watch Jesus and grumble. “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” The Greek word here for welcome can mean “to seek out” or it can mean “to host.” “That’s right, Jesus. Don’t just tolerate the riff-raff. Seek them out and host them while you’re at it!” And as you students of the Bible remember, Jesus makes the situation even more offensive because he even *eats* with the tax collectors and sinners—a sign that they are accepted by him.

Well, Luke says Jesus is aware of this group of Pharisees and scribes who are watching and criticizing him. Notice what Jesus does. He does not abandon his principles (God’s principles) of hospitality and love in order to placate his critics. In fact, Jesus never abandons his principles in order to pacify friends, enemies, bullies, anyone. He never does. A character in one of Cormac McCarthy’s novels thinks to himself, “That all courage was a form of constancy. That it was always himself that the coward abandoned first. After this all other betrayals came easily.” (Cormac McCarthy, *All The Pretty Horses*, 235.)

Jeff Paschal

Jesus never abandons himself. He is a model of constancy, an exemplar of courage for us, his church.

But instead of just arguing with the Pharisees and scribes straight on, as Jesus sometimes does, this time he uses different tactics. He tells three parables, three parables of joy. On a Sunday back in March we looked at the last of the three, the parable of the prodigal son. Today, we look at the first two—the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin.

“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one, doesn’t leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”

Well, this is a problem right away. You’ve got a hundred sheep and you’re just going to leave ninety-nine in the wilderness, so you can go looking for one sheep until you find it? Seriously? This is foolish and irresponsible when you consider the ninety-nine. As one Bible expert points out, “Perhaps trying to offer a rationale for the shepherd’s decision, the *Gospel of Thomas* [that did not make it into our Bible]

Jeff Paschal

portrays the lost sheep as the largest and most valuable of all. Luke offers no such details.”

Wouldn't it be expedient to tab up the value of ninety-nine compared to the one lost sheep and make a financial decision based on that information? Besides, maybe that one lost sheep was too lazy to keep up with the flock or was stubborn and wandered off. Maybe that one lost sheep did not *deserve* to be found and should simply be abandoned. But we hear none of these rationales cross the shepherd's mind.

Jesus says the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine and goes looking for that lost sheep until he finds it. And when he finds it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. You see, a lost sheep will often lie down bleating, (baah baah) becoming so frightened it is paralyzed and won't move, no matter what.

Have you ever had a time in your life when you felt so separated from God that you were paralyzed, unable to move? Maybe you had done something wrong that haunted you. Or maybe you were facing a

Jeff Paschal

situation in which any decision you made would be hurtful and costly.

Have you been a lost sheep? Are you one today?

But Jesus says the shepherd keeps on looking for the lost sheep until he finds it, and when he finds it, he actually carries the sheep home on his shoulders and rejoices. Then he calls together friends and neighbors together to rejoice with him. Sounds like a party, doesn't it?

"Just so," says Jesus, "there's more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance."

What an odd and amazing thing to say! According to Jesus there's a party, there's rejoicing in heaven, when a sinner repents. Whenever we allow God to work in us to change our minds, turn away from the thoughts, words, and behaviors that are destructive in our relationship with God, with each other, and with the planet, *then* there is rejoicing in heaven.

Then Jesus tells a second story. This time the lead character in the story is a woman. "What woman," asks Jesus, "if she has ten silver coins

Jeff Paschal

and loses one, doesn't light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?"

Notice that, like the lost sheep, the coin doesn't do anything to get found. The woman does everything that needs to be done, lighting the lamp, sweeping the house, searching until she finds the coin. The woman is relentless. Why? Because the coin is precious to her.

A character in one of Wendell Berry's novels thinks to herself, "To be the mother of a grown-up child means that you don't have a child anymore, and that is sad. When the grown-up child leaves home, that is sadder. I wanted Margaret to go to college, but when she actually went away it broke my heart. Maybe if you had enough children you could get used to those departures, but, having only three, I never did. I felt them like amputations. Something I needed was missing. Sometimes, even now, when I come into this house and it sounds empty, before I think I will wonder, 'Where are they?'" (Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 116.)

Like the shepherd with the lost sheep, Jesus says the woman doesn't give up until she finds that which is treasured to her. When the woman finds the coin, she calls together her friends and neighbors to

Jeff Paschal

rejoice. And there is joy in the presence of the angels of God whenever one sinner repents.

Jesus promises that there is a longing within the heart of God, an unquenchable thirst to bring us sinners home. And when God finally leads us to repentance, guides us back home, God, God's very self, rejoices.

The God we know in Jesus Christ is relentless, calling us to repentance, bringing us back into right relationship. Let us look into our hearts this week. How is God calling for repentance in our individual lives? Our life as a congregation? Our life as a country and as a world? Because God loves us and wants what is best for us, God also calls us and empowers us to live differently, to live as instruments of God's justice, mercy, and love. God comes to us first, and simply asks that we say "yes."

It's been more than thirty years, but I recall the time I went to the crib to pick up my son, Michael, to feed him his bottle. Michael had just awakened from his nap. And I began to reach into the crib, but he

Jeff Paschal

surprised me. For the first time, he reached back, he reached up to me.

And so I rejoiced.

And so it is that there is more rejoicing in heaven, rejoicing in the very heart of God when at last we repent, when we reach back and up to

be welcomed into the forgiving and loving arms of God. Amen. ©Jeff

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