

Sermon TUMC – September 11, 2016 Gathering Sunday

Lost and Found

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Text: Luke 15:1-24

Prayer of Illumination:

Guide us, O God, by your Word, and Holy Spirit,
that in your light we may see light,
in your truth find freedom,
and in your will discover peace, Amen

Luke 15:1-24 -- I'll be reading a somewhat paraphrased version.

All the tax collectors (*political collaborators*) and sinners (*people who were ignorant about right living*) were gathering around Jesus to listen to him.

The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!" (*He parties all the time!*)

So, Jesus told them this parable:

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?

When he has found the lost sheep, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

And when he comes home, he calls together (*or group texts*) his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Celebrate with me (*let's have a party*), for I have found my sheep that was lost!"

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine people who have no need to change their lives.

Or, or what woman having ten silver coins (*that's 10 days wages!*), if she loses one of them, won't light a lamp (*houses were dark back then*), sweep the house (*what if it fell under something?*), and search carefully (*in purses and coat pockets*) until she finds it?

When she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, "Celebrate with me, (*My house is clean, let's have a party!*) for I have found the coin that I had lost!"

Just so, I tell you, joy breaks out in the presence of God's angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life." (*Woo hoo!*)

Jesus said:

A certain man had two sons.

The younger son said to his father, "Dad, give me my share of the inheritance."

Then the father divided his estate between them (and gave him his third).

Soon after, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.

When he had used up all his resources, a severe food shortage in that country and he began to be in need. *(There were no food banks so)* He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into the field to feed pigs. *(It was so bad)* that he longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate – but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said "How many of my Dad's hired hands have more than enough food, but *(here I am)* starving to death – *(and feeding pigs!)*

(I know!), I'll get up and go to my father and say to him, "Dad, I have sinned against heaven and against you *(that is to say, I broke the commandment to honour my parents)*. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands." – *At least that way I might have something to eat!*

So he got up and went to his father.

While he was still a long way off, his father *(who was always on the lookout for him)* saw him and was moved with compassion.

His father ran to him– *(he just took off in his direction)* – he hugged him, and kissed him.

Then his son *(started to say the words he had practiced)* he said, "Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son."

But the father *(didn't seem to hear it)*, he said to one of his servants, "Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger *(that shows he is my son)* and sandals on his feet! *(Oh, and you might want to arrange for a bath, he smells kinda strange)*

Fetch the fatted calf *(that we keep for special occasions)* and slaughter it *(for a BBQ)*. *We're having a party!* We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine – *my boy* – was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found! And they began to celebrate.

(There's more to the story, but we'll end here)

One of the things that intrigues me a lot about Jesus is that he was criticized for having too many parties. He was always gathering together with the wrong people, so-called sinners and eating with them.

Well, do you know how we're supposed to be like Jesus? What if one of our goals as a church was to be criticized for being too welcoming, for having too many parties, just like Jesus? Wouldn't that be amazing?

I actually have a not-so secret not-really-serious-yet plan to someday start my own denomination, (Temporarily named God is a party, *Deus é Festa*) in which we will have brunches and evening bbqs instead of early services on Sundays and where the utmost compliment will be to be criticized for having too many parties with the "wrong" kind of people. Its main foundation will be hospitality and welcome. I'll make sure to keep you posted in case you want to join.

What was Jesus up to here in this passage?

The reason he tells the three lost stories is in response to all the grumbling about Jesus' hospitality. The establishment complained that Jesus not only welcomes sinners, but eats with them too. It just wasn't done that way. Eating together was for family and like-minded people, not for people who didn't obey the rules, or who were outsiders, or who maybe, by insider definition were not part of God's family.

Why do you suppose he tells these three stories of people losing and finding things and then throwing a party?

Let's look at it more closely.

What these stories have in common is that something is lost, then someone finds it and then that someone gathers their friends and family and throws a party, a party for the return of the lost. A lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son.

Lately I am reminded that Jesus' parables were not neat and tidy, they are head scratchers. Those of us who grew up in church with explanations being handed to us on theological platters are probably too far removed from the stories to understand fully what Jesus meant.

But let's give it a try. A good start to understanding them is to put the problems back into the stories. To wonder what Jesus was getting at.

For example: How do we understand the idea of something being lost? Who is responsible for something getting lost in the first place?

First of all, how did the shepherd notice that one sheep was missing? When Jesus asks who wouldn't leave 100 sheep and go to find one that was lost, the answer

wasn't all that clear. It didn't make "business sense" to do it, shouldn't he have cut his losses. Who took care of the 99 that stayed behind in the wilderness while he went to rescue that one dumb sheep? How long did it take? How stubborn was that sheep that he had to pick it up and carry it? Why bother?

When the woman spends all day looking for one coin, was that really the best use of her time that day? What about her other chores? Didn't the party probably cost more than one coin? Was it worth it?

And as for the father, shouldn't he have given his son at least a probationary period to make sure he had actually repented before slaughtering an entire animal and staging an impromptu party for his neighbours on a weeknight? (*Ok I threw the weeknight thing in, it doesn't say that.*)

Oh but wait, here's another problem, sheep, coins and often people who make bad decisions don't have much capacity for repentance. They need to be found by no action of their own, there are no conditions, someone else does the finding. **The party happens just because the lost are back where they belong not because of anything they did.**

Here's another question: If you put yourself there, who would you be in the story? The critic? The lost? The one who finds something or someone? Is God one of the characters of the story?

When Jesus sums things up, and puts it in cosmic terms, in terms of the realm of God, he explains his constant gatherings like this: there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine people who have no need to change their lives. He's excited when he finds people who are willing to be found.

This was a party week for me. A party here at TUMC, a wedding and the shower later on.

I was part of planning a party here for those of us who worked in the building during the renovations – who ate dust, moved boxes and dealt with each new unpredictability. We had lost our comfort and now it has been found!

It was so good to have a get together with some good food to turn the tide from our frustrations towards naming our gratitude, our hopes and expectations for our new offices and the bigger space.

I was also at a wedding last night and so I've noticed a few things about parties this week.

These gatherings, these celebrations are a way to amplify joy, they are a way to create community and relationship among strangers.

They are a way to name what is important and sometimes does not get named: gratitude, recognition and appreciation.

Well, and they're fun. Jesus was on to something.

I'd like to suggest that when we gather here on a Sunday morning for worship and for learning and for sharing our joys and sorrows, we are having a party of sorts.

We the church are a collection of people who have found God, we have found meaning and support together.

We are a collection of people who have found encouragement to live lives of integrity, lives that reflect that God has found us and is helping us to change our hearts and lives.

We have found community, we have found renewal and challenge, we have found grace, that wonderful gift of being accepted even though it may not be deserved.

God has found us, let's have a party.