

Rejoice with Me

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
September 11, 2016
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
Luke 15:1-10



I went to a great party last night. I wish I hadn't used up a sick Sunday on actually being sick last Sunday or I might have used it today. Wonderful party at the Bells. Everyone in the church was invited. I warned David and Diane. I said, "You maybe haven't been part of this church long enough to realize it, but these people love nothing more than a party." I think half the church was out there. Fifty years of marriage. I guess they're going to make it.

That's a good occasion for a party. But we really don't need a good occasion. I've been to parties where the laughter reverberated long into the night. Don't remember the occasion. I've been to a party where Hugh DuPree found a piano and started playing rock and roll. Can't remember the occasion, but when you have live music, now that's a party. I don't know that I've been to a party where Anne Rutherford wasn't in attendance, and she's usually still going strong when I'm calling it a night.

Fred Craddock reminds us, "Some people will celebrate anything. 'You know that diet I've been on for two years? Well, the scales say that I've lost five pounds. I thought we'd have a few friends in; I've made a chocolate fudge cake. I bought a gallon of strawberry ice cream; we want to celebrate this.'"

"You know our plumbing has been backed up for four days. Well, the Roto-Rooter man finally came; he has it unclogged, everything is flushing. Thought we'd have a few folk in and celebrate."

"We've rented the fellowship hall at the church. We have a live band; we're going to have a great time. Like for you to come." "I'll be glad to be there. What are we celebrating?" "It's Tuesday." Good enough for me.¹

Some people will celebrate anything. The shepherd has this one sheep. Every group, every family, every church, I suppose, has this one sheep. Always getting lost.

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 170.

You know how sheep get lost? Shepherds to this day will tell you – one nibble at a time. This one sheep just loves to eat, never lifts his eyes as long as his mouth is full, just eats a little bit, moves a little bit, eats a little bit more, and suddenly he feels the familiar tug of the shepherd’s crook. One more nibble and he would have fallen off the cliff. He looks up at the frustrated face of the shepherd. One in every flock.

Every church trip I’ve ever been on, youth, adult, doesn’t matter – there’s always one. Everybody’s on board the bus and we do the count – 29, 30, 31. Wait, let me count again, there’s supposed to be 32 – 29, 30, 31...Okay, we’re missing one. And everyone knows the one. Same one we’re always missing. Someone goes back into McDonalds, and there he is, nibbling on a French fry, oblivious. One nibble at a time. That’s how it happens.

One year, the bus was loaded after a restaurant stop, and it took off. The crew was several miles down the road before someone noticed Caleb, Harding, and Taylor weren’t on board. They turned around, went back frantically, and there they were. That’s the kind of thing you dread having to call the parents about. Good thing Cathy McCall was one of the adults on the trip, and one of those lost little lambs was hers. And of course, one was mine. I asked Caleb when he got home, “Did Miss Cathy throw a party for the three of you when you got found? You know, that’s biblical.” “Not quite,” was all he said.

There’s always one. And I suppose it is inevitable. Sooner or later, that one sheep with the propensity to nibble his way into the woods is going to get lost. And, Jesus says, “You know what you would do if you were a shepherd and the sheep that’s prone to wandering wanders far enough he doesn’t come back. You know what you would do. You’d leave the other ninety-nine, the ones who are always on the bus in time for the count, the ones who know how to eat and look up at the same time, the good little sheep. You’d leave them *in the wilderness* and begin searching. You would search and search, in every valley, on every hill, beside every brook, in every dark glade. You would not stop searching until you found that sheep. And then, you know what you’d do. You’d throw that sheep up on your shoulders, rush home, get some balloons, a cake, some party favors and invite the whole neighborhood over to celebrate.”

And the crowd listening to Jesus must be waiting for the punch line. Surely he’s going to say, “And the main course for my party is veal, because I’m done with this wandering lamb.”

But the punch line doesn’t come. Jesus means to say it. This deranged shepherd has left those ninety-nine in the wilderness. He doesn’t even go back to get them after he

finds the lost sheep. He rushes home to have a big party. Some people will celebrate anything.

Maybe Jesus sees the befuddled looks on their faces, hears someone whisper, “Remind me to never hire *him* to look after my sheep.” So he clears his throat and tries another story. This one involves a woman with a pretty nice savings account – ten silver coins. She loses one. Apparently she doesn’t realize it until the dead of night. But it’s important enough to her that she lights a lamp and sweeps frantically. She does not stop until she finds the coin. And, Jesus says, you know what you would do if you found a lost coin like that. You’d wake up your neighbors, bring out the streamers, and put on a party.

More than one scholar has pointed out that the cost of the gas to light the lamp in the middle of the night and the party would have been more than the value of the one coin.

There’s only one answer to Jesus’ hypothetical searching shepherd and sweeping woman – no one would ever do something like that. No shepherd would risk the ninety-nine to save the one; no woman would sweep the house in the middle of the night; and no one would *ever* throw a party for either.

And they would be right.

But sitting where Jesus is sitting, surrounded by hated tax collectors and assorted other sinners, dipping his bread in the same bowl with the despised and rejected, raising a glass with people who never get an invitation to a party – sitting where Jesus is sitting you can imagine, maybe just for a moment, the possibility that God’s grace might be just that – *grace*. That God would search every valley and hill, sweep every inch of the house, risk it all, lose it all, for the sake of finding the lost, which includes those who think they aren’t.

Remember, they are the ones we heard about at the beginning, grumbling, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” They are the reason for these stories, and they are the audience, as are we all.

The real shock of the parable is that by the time you get to the end, you realize, there are no ninety-nine sheep. There are no nine coins. There is only the one.

Jesus says it. “There is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous who need no repentance.” The parables are meant to shock the imagination into an awareness that we too often forget – we all need repentance; we all

need grace. We are all the one. There is no true ninety-nine, only those who imagine themselves in the ninety-nine.

We need these simple stories. We need them today as we remember the terror that gripped our country fifteen years ago, and still stalks our world. We need them in a political environment keen on dividing the righteous from the unrighteous. We need them to be told every time we are tempted to use our religion to decide who can eat at the table and who cannot, when we are tempted to pretend that those sheep caught in the dark wood should have known better and, besides, we need to take care of our own.

These stories speak today, every time Christ sets this table in our midst and issues the invitation he has from the very beginning. Come, you who are the one. I have been searching for you. Come, join your fellow sinners at this table. It is big enough, God's grace is wide enough, for all. And when you get here, "Rejoice with me. Rejoice with me. Rejoice with all of heaven. The sheep has been found, the coin has been found, you have been found, and heaven is having a party. Rejoice with me."

Some people will celebrate anything. Amen.