

Judgment to Joy

Luke 15:1-10

Rev. Brett Shoemaker ~ September 14, 2025 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹ Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ “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? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

⁸ “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:1-10, NRSV)



I want to just listen for a minute. What do you hear? There’s bound to be noises surrounding our time of worship if we listen for it. So much of what we did around here this summer was flavored with a little background noise. There were the roofers that kept forgetting our Vacation Bible School was right underneath them. Just last week, we had several days of pavers and painters doing a great job on our parking lot. Bible Study Fellowship started up one morning a week along with start ups of Little League coaches and AA meetings, Kid’s Club (where I made sure we created some noise of our own). There’s just a lot going on – all signs of life, and part of the bigger picture of what God is up to in this place.

At one point, I was working on this message on a blanket at McKinley Park to the background of people playing tennis. If you’ve forgotten, that’s the game played on a bigger court with bigger racquets before Pickleball took over the world. And almost in the middle of writing the sentence a pink tennis ball came

over the fence and landed right next to me. There’s always something in the background.

More significantly, we’ve lived this week with the news as background noise, coloring, or in many cases, tainting, all we’ve been working on and the conversations we’ve tried to have. More tragedy that makes no sense, and as soon as we try, we get spun around by the media and social media that reacts before it has a chance to even realize the impact of what it’s saying. I found it hard to think, harder to pray this week.

There was a moment when I asked out loud: “What would Jesus say in this moment about this moment?”

We don’t have to guess. We have Jesus’ words right here in front of us. We just read them. Some of you may be feeling like humanity has been lost beyond hope. Jesus reminds us this morning that his Father will do whatever it takes, has done whatever it takes, to find us again, and bring us home.

There is hope.

These stories are about individuals who are lost, but Jesus’ parables always point to something bigger, to a love of God that can embrace all of us. Pharisees and teachers, tax-collectors and sinners, people on the right, people on the left, people living in tents, people worshipping in the pews, people in Gaza, Palestine, and Australia, and Alaska...yeah, just those places...no, every corner of the world – even the dark corner you may feel in yourself. A number of people in our own church community have experienced profound tragedy this summer, too. May these words reach you with some comfort today.

But truly, this story is for all of us. For God so loved the *world* that he left the 99, sent his one and only son, and made it possible for me as a pastor, thankfully, to stand before you even after a week like this and say:

“God is on his way to find the one again. There is hope.”

In our story this morning, Jesus suddenly becomes surrounded by all the wrong kind of people – tax-collectors and sinners, which is code language for *every kind of unclean and unwelcome human being in that region*. And you get the sense that there is one circle of the riff-

raff surrounding Jesus, and another half-circle of those “religious types” whispering, pointing, and the word Luke uses – *grumbling*.

Background noise.

The grumbling of the Pharisees and teachers of the law was the background noise to the story Jesus was telling the others. And the story was an answer *to the noise*.

The word grumbling has been translated as complaining, or murmuring. This particular Greek word was only used one other time by Luke in his gospel – when Zaccheus had Jesus over for dinner:

All who saw what was happening with Zaccheus began to grumble (complain, murmur amongst themselves), “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”¹

But guess what? We have hints of this same murmuring in the Israelites’ grumbling in the dessert. Jim Edwards says:

In the wilderness, murmuring is a consequence of ingratitude and an expression of unfaithfulness. What was directed against God in the exodus is here directed against Jesus.²

Background noise. Our complaining and ingratitude *can* be a theme of background noise to the main event – which is God’s faithfulness always, going way out of his way to find us and bring us back.

Before Jesus begins these two familiar parables, we hear the Pharisees say:

This man welcomes sinners and eats with them (verse 2).

These words are the central message of the Gospel, and they are spoken as an insult *against Jesus*. I’m surprised Jesus didn’t say back: Yes! I do! That’s the whole point, I’m glad you finally get it!

Instead, he tells three parables in hopes that they would finally get it. Maybe some did that day. Maybe some of us will today. We’re looking at just two of these stories. The third is the Prodigal Son (or Prodigal Father as some call it). It deserves about six months’ worth of sermons on its own.

And typically, our mental picture of these stories are as great *children’s* stories. We may have pictures in our minds of the lamb on the shepherd’s shoulders, and the woman sweeping for the coin. They are great children’s stories. But let’s not forget the background noise, the grumbling, the *reason*, that Jesus is telling the story to this very divided group of listeners.

Early on here, I want to ask a question that I also will

want to close with, to leave you something to discuss in your life groups this week. It’s a question that commentator Tom Wright asks about this passage:

What might today’s Christians do that would make people ask, “Why are you doing something like that?”, and give us the chance to tell stories about finding something that was lost?

Jesus felt that he had to tell these stories because of the Pharisees’ background noise.

Hopefully, the Pharisees felt challenged to expand their welcome into God’s community.

Hopefully, the sinners and tax collectors heard the part about the need to repent.

Hopefully, people on both sides of the aisle here heard the point about a reckless God who would make dangerous and illogical decisions to show his love for everyone there – for anyone there that recognizes they are lost. And often, it’s the one we least expect.

Hopefully for us, this over-the-top crazy love of God is becoming the *real* background noise in our lives in a way that makes others begin to ask, “Why are you like that?” Then *we* get to share a story – or maybe *the* story of something lost and found. Maybe it’s already happening. We’re living in a world that seems to be more and more ready to hear it.

We are in between a series about spiritual practices. We just finished prayer, and in a couple weeks we’ll start a new one. Let’s see if you can figure it out:

Week 1 – *Why are we being called OUT?*

Week 2 – *Who sends us OUT?*

AND Week 3 – *What is our message when we go OUT?*

We go OUT because God has first gone out for us. That’s all I’ll say, I’ll spoil no more than that.

It’s important for us to know or remember that the Pharisees held close a strong *theology of judgment*. They lived their lives to avoid God’s judgment, but they also lived to avoid others who should be *receiving* God’s judgment. I learned a new word this week: *Imprecatory*.

An *imprecation* is a spoken curse against a person or group of people. And the Hebrews had a whole category of Psalms and prayers that were imprecatory prayers. They were an appeal to God to take vengeance against evil or unfaithful people. They express grief and anger as they call for swift, divine justice. If that justice happens, it will bring them great joy it seems to say!

Psalms 109 for example, just a few verses:

¹ Luke 19:7

² Edwards, Jim. *The Gospel According to Luke*. Pg 433.

When he shall be judged, let him be condemned: and let his prayer become sin.
Let his days be few; and let another take his office.
Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow.³

Wow.

The Psalm is filled with these. As you read through the Psalms, you hear them often. Some days, we need those words!

Here is a common prayer of a first century Pharisee:

I thank you Lord, my God, that you have set my portion with those who sit in the sanctuary, and not with those who sit on street corners. I rise early and they rise early. I rise to attend to the word of Torah, and they rise to attend to futile things. I exert myself and they exert themselves. I exert myself and receive a reward. They exert themselves and receive no reward. I run and they run. I run to life in the world to come, and they run to the pit of destruction.

Even Jonah quotes these psalms and prayers when he chooses a seat on the hill to watch God take judgment on the city of Nineveh.

Except God doesn't. He saves them. Why? Because for some reason only God knows, they turn around. They repent. And Jonah is furious. Where's the wrath of God?

And now these Pharisees find themselves hoping that Jesus will speak out against these unclean, unworthy people that are clamoring around him.

Except Jesus doesn't. Instead, he tells a story about how much God loves them!

The first shall be last, the last first. The lowest among you gets the blessing.

I told you I had tennis sounds in the background a I wrote this. And I noticed – the tennis players who had nothing were the ones that had love 😊.

Within this parable, we might imagine a Jesus that seems to say that these tax collectors are loved more than the others. But skip ahead to the parable of the Lost Son, the third story of this trilogy. At the end, the older brother had the same question. *I've been with you all these years, and you never gave me a goat for a party!* But the Father reminds him:

*Son, you've always been with me, and all I have is yours. But we had to celebrate – your brother was lost and is found!*⁴

Jesus is masterful in these parables with this audience. He is not only calling everyone listening to hear God's great love for them individually. But at the very same time, with the very same words, he is calling especially the Pharisees (but also everyone listening) to follow suit, to be like Jesus – to make it *our* mission to go out of our way to seek and find and throw a party for those that are lost.

The question is: What does that look like?

Maybe you saw the words of Andrew Murray on the cover:
"There is no nobler work than bringing the wanderer home to the Father."

William Booth was the founder of the Salvation Army, a ministry that has by name and mission literally sought and saved and been a light to the lost of this world. He took Jesus literally when he said:

"Go for souls. Go straight for souls, and go for the worst."

Jesus opens this whole conversation with a question.
Which of you if you had 100 sheep, and one wandered away, would not leave 99 of them unattended in the open wilderness, vulnerable to predators and other dangers, so you could go find just one?

We treat this like a rhetorical question because we've heard it so much. But it's not rhetorical! These people knew real shepherds. Any sense of reason would dictate that a shepherd should cut his losses, count his blessings, and go happily on his way with the herd.

In a similar way, he asks about the amount of time the woman spends to find the lost coin. It would likely have been about a day or two worth of wages. Does she really spend a whole day and night looking for a day's wages?

And then, the listeners should have had some questions about the parties that are being thrown. Albert Schweitzer remembers the comment of a boy in a Sunday School class who heard this story and burst out with:

*What a dumb woman! She spent more on the party than the coin was worth!*⁵

It's comments like this – really looking at the story that forces us to come back and see that it is God who is the reckless one, spending far more love on people that do not seem worth it. God's love doesn't scale well

– except for the power of the Resurrection and the promise of the Kingdom of God for eternity, then all

³ Psalm 109:7-9

⁴ Luke 15:31

⁵⁵ Edwards, Jim. *Gospel of Luke (quoting Schweitzer)*. Pg 436.

economy of this world goes right out the window.

Jim Edwards says this: *The JOY of God has no price tag.*

Very rarely does Jesus pull a reference out of thin air. Usually, we can find a connection with the character of God that is consistent throughout the story of the Hebrew people in the Old Testament. We already mentioned the grumbling of the Pharisees.

But when these same Pharisees and teachers of the law heard the story of the lost sheep, one of them might have leaned to another and said: *EZEKIEL 34* (a preview to Dennis' class?). I'll leave a few verses from that chapter for you to read with your life group. They are in the question, but let me just set it up with verse 6:

*My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.*⁶

Now go and read the others and hear how the heart of God for his people has been wrapped in this metaphor all through Scripture's story.

I heard about a story that is happening right now in our own community. It's a story of people that drive 40-45 minutes each way twice a week to pick up a boy to help tutor him and give him a chance to connect with our church at Kid's Club, VBS, and other opportunities. Why? His parents and siblings all lost their lives in an accident that he barely survived a couple years ago. A real-life example of seeking and finding, and responding to someone with love and sacrifice. It might make someone ask, "Why would you do that?"

There could only be one answer: *Just trying to reflect the crazy love God has for me.*

I see this repeated over and over in many forms as I talk to people and watch the lives that so many of you lead. Every week, there are stories to tell of looking to find something that is lost and bringing hope.

Have you had those moments where you felt God calling you to leave behind 99 things on your to-do list to respond to one person in need? Or have you ever left behind the chance to earn 99 dollars, but instead made yourself available to be able share one dollar with someone in need?

It's not about saying "Yes" to everything. It's finding that one thing or person God may be calling you to in this season that may be reckless and unreasonable that causes us to say "No" to several other things – to attend

to that one. It's losing your life for the sake of the two greatest commands to love God and love others.

Let me close once again with this question that I promised I'd leave you with. A question I'd encourage you to wrestle with this week in small groups or on your own:

What might today's Christians – what might we do – that would make people ask, "Why are you doing something like that?", and give us the chance to tell stories about finding something that was lost?

A prayer for you today: That the sound of God singing his love over you would more and more become the real background noise of your life in this next week to come.

Amen.



NEXT STEP QUESTIONS:

1. Read the passage together again. Consider reading the whole chapter and see how the theme is carried all of the way through Chapter 15. What catches your attention that you didn't notice before?
2. What characters are present with Jesus here (verses 1-2)? What was the attitude of each of these groups of people as Jesus begins to tell this story?
3. In your own short or long journey of pursuing a life with Jesus, do you identify more with the Pharisees and teachers or with the sinners and tax collectors? How does this affect the way you hear these stories of Jesus?
4. Read Ezekiel 34, verses 6, 11, and 16. How does Jesus reflect his Father's heart in these stories. How do these words confirm or challenge your view of God in the Old Testament?
5. Someone might say that it seems the shepherd loved this one sheep more than the others (or that the woman thought the lost coin was worth more than the others). Considering what you know of God's character, how would you respond to that? Are there any other scripture passages that would help shape your answer?
6. Can you remember a time when seeing someone come to know the Lord brought you great joy?

⁶ Ezekiel 34:6

7. For you as a follower of Jesus (or for us as a church), what do each of these stages of these parables look like in real life: Seeking? Finding? Throwing a party?
8. To close, read this quote below by Tom Wright. How would you answer his question?

What might we -- today's Christians -- do that would make people ask, "Why are you doing something like that?", and

*give us the chance to tell stories about finding something that was lost? (Wright, Tom, *Luke for Everyone*, 185)*

TABLE TO TABLE:

- *Have you ever lost something valuable to you and found it again? How did it feel?*
- *How do you think God feels when someone really learns how much he loves them?*