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First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange Texas  
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Luke 15:1-10

## Rejoice with Me

I must have been about eleven or twelve when a family trip to my grandmother's ranch coincided with a cattle round-up. Mister Minner was leasing the homestead, the smaller the 250-acre pasture, to graze about 80 or so head waiting for the calves to arrive.

I was wide-eyed as cowboys moved the herd from pasture to corral, through a squeeze chute, into a pen. In that chute, each cow was vet-checked, immunized, and calves were branded. It was organized chaos and in the middle of it, Mister Minner tracked the cows with a click counter.

I don't know much about counting sheep—but counting cows looked like hard work.

With the last of the cows counted, the search was on for the heifer and calf who slipped by the roundup.

As we read this morning, Luke has done some of the exegesis for us. The parable of the lost sheep is also found in Matthew, but in his gospel account, the parable is part of a conversation Jesus has with his own disciples.

The disciples have asked who will be most important in heaven. Placing a child in their midst, Jesus warns about them about being a stumbling block to one of these little ones and then turns the question to them... "What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray..." (Mt 18:12).

For Matthew, the parable of the sheep calls for humility and demonstrates the importance of the least, the last, and the lost.

In Luke's gospel, we get not only the parable of a lost sheep, but also the parable of a lost coin, and finally the parable of a lost son. And in Luke, we have quite a different setting.

Luke explains that the tax-gatherers and the sinful ones are coming near to listen to Jesus; they *hear him*. With that single word "hear," we are clued-in that these strange folks have grabbed hold of the good news as Jesus preaches the gospel word.

The scribes and the Pharisees express some dissatisfaction about this... about Jesus welcoming these folks and sharing table fellowship with them. Those who work so hard to adhere to the covenant of God, are *not so sure* that Jesus ought to associate with Roman collaborators and those who have forsaken the ways of God's people.

Yet, Jesus—in his own body—knows the lengths to which God will go to redeem the lost. So, he tells these parables of things lost and found and the invitation to rejoice that follows.

“Which of you, having a hundred sheep...” he begins.

We often hear these parables as addressing the outcast and the poor, but the characters in these three parables are not among them. A hundred sheep is a respectable living. Ten silver coins—almost certainly to be drachmas—are the price of two oxen. The family with the lost son has servants and rings and robes AND property to divide.

In these parables, Jesus asks us to imagine a person of substance *WHO TAKES NOTICE* of what is missing, *WHO CARES* enough to seek what is lost, *WHO REJOICES* over what is found.

In Luke’s gospel, this is framed in the language of repentance—“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” (Lk 15:7). “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Lk 15:10).

Just so...

In her exploration of the sheep and the coins, New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine writes, “the missing sheep, whether it is one of a hundred or a million, makes the flock incomplete. [The owner] engages in an exaggerated search, and when he has found the sheep, he engages in an equally exaggerated sense of rejoicing, first by himself and then with his friends and neighbors.”<sup>1</sup>

“Which one of you...” Jesus asks, wouldn’t respond in the same way?

Linda, my friend and attorney, calls this kind of interrogation a “reasonable man” standard. But as I listen, I wonder: *Is it really reasonable to leave ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to look for a single sheep? Wouldn’t the owner be better off cutting his losses?*

With both sheep and coins, the owner conducts an exhausting, time consuming search. Then, when the sheep and coin are found, they call on friends and neighbors to celebrate and rejoice. If we are looking at this from a standpoint of economics, there is a certain irony here. It doesn’t take too much to imagine that party supplies might cost more than a single drachma or that mutton might have been on the menu.

My grandmother might have called these owners “penny wise and pound foolish.”

We might wonder: *What sort of fool acts this way?* That is when Jesus sweeps away the curtain in dramatic fashion to reveal a glimpse of heaven with angels dancing, God rejoicing, and the community restored to wholeness.

This reminds me a little of “Let’s Make a Deal.” Depending on who you are this could be like trading for Curtain Number 2 and finding a zonk when you had hoped for a grand prize instead.

Jesus is talking to the scribes and the Pharisees and through them to Luke's congregation and through Luke, he is talking to us. THIS is the nature of our God who goes to unimaginable lengths—all the way to Golgotha—to seek out the lost and with whom all of heaven rejoices whenever a lost one is found.

Sheep and coins are great but in Luke's gospel, Jesus isn't finished with us yet.

There is a final parable—the familiar story of a lost son. Amy-Jill Levine draws our attention to the themes that connect the stories: “loss, and joy and feasting...” She then points out the “folkloric ‘rule of three’” like the Three Little Pigs, or even the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The first two in the series, she explains, set up the third which will be the same—yet different.<sup>2</sup>

Sheep and coins have no agency—so we can hear tell of the seeker without judging the one who is lost. But the third parable begins with two sons. Here Jesus goes from preaching to meddling...

The younger son takes his inheritance early and disappears into the Gentile wilderness where he squanders the money. Broke, hungry, and employed as a pig-feeder, he returns to his senses and heads home.

His Father celebrates him as one who was dead and now is alive, who was lost and now is found. Then the Father invites the neighbors in to celebrate. Loss, joy, feasting...

We would be reasonable to think of the younger son as the “lost” even though the Father does not seek after him, but only awaits his return. Yet, as we near the end of the parable, we find the Father desperately searching for his older son, the faithful one, who has—in his anger—absented himself from the celebration.

Perhaps it is not the younger son who is lost.

The father pleads with his eldest to come back inside, pleads with him to be reconciled—and that is where the curtain drops. The final action on the part of the elder brother remains unknown.

That is the question that hangs before us: What will the eldest son do? What will we do in the face of God's irrepressible, unimaginable, amazing grace?

Yes, Jesus eats with tax gatherers and sinful ones, and he eats with Pharisees and scribes and priest, and he gathers us to table, because we all need reconciliation with God and with one other.

Outlook editor Jill Duffield puts it this way, “God yearns to rejoice over our salvation, our turning, our transformation, making of us an example to others of divine goodness and power.”<sup>3</sup>

I was struck by that phrase: God yearns to rejoice...

Growing up, I attended a Baptist parochial school. Each fall and spring, the church held revivals. This meant chapel every day, five full days of amazing speakers who shared deep conversion experiences. With candid talk about addiction and anger, homelessness and helplessness and hopelessness, they described the incredible transformation of being “found” by Jesus.

They testified that God forged a relationship with them, which brought healing and restoration, forgiveness and peace, and the energy to live new lives. They celebrated with the communities who shared God’s love becoming—for them—places of hope and a source of strength.

I always felt a little uneasy, because I was a good Presbyterian girl and didn’t have a conversion experience to share. I wondered if something were missing, as if my place among God’s people were in question.

There was such joy there—I wondered if *I* could be part of it?

The answer came from the Apostle Paul, who assures the church at Corinth, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ... and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor 5:17-19).

Friends, God is gathering new sheep into our flock and asks us to rejoice—because what was lost has been found.

God is sweeping the world gathering coins and inviting us into the celebration—because what was lost has been found.

God is speaking to the children who have strayed and the children who have stayed and offering each and all of us the reconciliation that makes us complete. We are invited to rejoice—because we know what it means to be pursued by the God of love, to be found, to be welcomed, to be restored, to be made whole. Then we are invited, as the body of Christ, to take up the reconciling work of Jesus—because there is more searching and finding and welcoming to do.

With each restoration, with each new face, with each act of inclusion, we are invited to heed Jesus’ call, “Rejoice with me!”—because what was lost has been found.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Levine, Amy-Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2015). 44.

<sup>2</sup> Levine. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Duffield, Jill. “Looking into the Lectionary.” *The Presbyterian Outlook*. pres-outlook.org. 13 September 2019.