

REJOICE WITH ME! Luke 15

You could call; the fifteenth chapter of Luke “the gospel within the gospel”. Beginning with the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, and ending with Luke’s story of the two lost sons, it is good news all the way. Everything that was lost is found. The lost sheep is returned to the flock, the lost coin is recovered by its owner, the lost son is restored to his Father, and the parties go on all night long. God’s talent for finding us proves greater than our talent for getting lost, and there is joy in heaven as well as on earth.

We love these stories because we imagine ourselves on the receiving end of them. I listen to the parable of the lost sheep and it is about me. I am the poor, tuckered out lamb, draped across my dear redeemer’s shoulders so full of gratitude and relief that I vow never to wander away from him again. Or I am a silver coin, lying in some dark corner of the universe until the good women who will not give up on me sweeps me into the light. They are stories about me, and I treasure them, but in their original context they sounded like anything but good news to their hearers.

At the beginning of the fifteenth chapter, Jesus is criticized for the 3rd time by the Pharisees for spending his day with sinners, lepers, tax collectors, women of the night, and not only for talking with them, but for eating with them as well, in open defiance of Jewish dietary laws. Not content with dining with them in their unclean homes, he has gone beyond the “pale” by receiving them, returning their hospitality and receiving them as a host would his guest. The sinners, needless to say, are fascinated by his treatment of them. Whatever this man has to say, they want to hear more. They draw near to him, while the scribes and Pharisees choke on their rage.

From the modern perspective it’s hard to see what all the fuss is about. Jesus the good shepherd is just doing his job. Jesus the good housekeeper is just making sure every corner has been swept.

But in the parable real sinners and real Pharisees are brought face to face with a real Jesus. I don’t know how they look to you, but I imagine Jesus down at the plasma bank, standing in line with the hung-over men waiting to sell their blood, or maybe down at the jail shooting the breeze with the bail bondsmen who cruise the place like vultures. I imagine him down at the White Cross Drugs on Las Vegas Blvd with a crack dealer, a car thief, a prostitute with aids, buying them all a cheese omelet, when I come in with the confirmation class and sit down a couple of booths away.

I imagine the kids getting a load of this then beginning to ask me questions. Is that who we think it us?” “How come you warn us to stay away from people like that and there he is...?”

Then I imagine myself saying to them about how those that are well don’t need a physician or about how the good shepherd cares more for the one than the ninety and nine. I could show them this evening’s parables, I suppose, but the words get stuck in my throat.

I suppose I'm afraid they might get the message that to be lost is to be precious in the sight of God, and that their good behavior rates less joy in heaven than the alleged repentance going on at the nearby table. How do you tell kids something like that? It's like telling them to get lost.

That's how it sounded to the Scribes and Pharisees, anyhow. They are God fearing believers, devoted disciples who do not merely talk about the life of faith but are willing to live it because they mean to set an example. They mean to offer a healthy alternative to the ways of the world, showing people that it is possible and pleasing to live according to God's will.

They are not uninterested in sinners, but they believe that the best way to help them is to hold up a high standard, inviting them to achieve it, and letting them know where they fall short, until they are finally challenged to become all they can be. Some people have what it takes and some tragically do not, but there is nothing to be gained by mixing the two.

It's the kind of message that appeals to people. It makes the rules clear and rewards those who obey them, admitting the winners to the ranks of the educated, and sending the losers back to try, try, again. They each stick to their own kind and they know who they are. The righteous know that they give heaven a reason to rejoice, and the sinners know they grieve the heart of God, if God knows or cares who they are at all.

Then Jesus comes along and starts messing with the system, treating sinners like special cases and making them think they're as important as other people. He socializes with them, which is as good as condoning their behavior, and thereby robs them of their motivation to do better. Why should they buy anything from the Pharisees that Jesus is giving away for free? All they have to do is wander off from the flock, pursuing their own whims, and the good shepherd will go off after them, leaving the 99 to fend for themselves. It is not only bad shepherding, it's bad pastoral care. It's bad theology if you receive sinners and admonish the righteous, when the system is clearly set up to work the other way around, then what will happen to the community of faith? What about the good people? What about us?

According to Jesus' explanations, they are about heaven's joy over one repentant sinner, but the lost sheep does not repent as far as I can tell and the lost coin certainly doesn't. They are both simply found.-not because either the sheep or the coin does something right, but because someone is determined to find them and does. They are restored thanks to God's action, not their own, so where does repentance come in at all?

"Which one of you," Jesus says, "having a hundred sheep..." He is not inviting the Pharisees to imagine themselves as sheep but to imagine themselves as shepherds, leaving their carefully tended flock in order to chase one stray through the wilderness.

Isn't it interesting the way we listen to parables like this one and can always find some way to wind up on the sheep's end instead of the shepherd's?

But if you are willing to go with a third possibility, if you are willing to be a shepherd, then the story begins to sound different. The accent in what Jesus says falls on a different syllable. Repentance is not the issue, but rejoicing. The plot is not about amending our evil ways but about seeking, sweeping, finding, and rejoicing. The invitation is not about being rescued by Jesus over and over again, but about being found and then joining him in rounding up God's flock and recovering God's treasure.

It is about questioning the idea that there are certain conditions the lost must meet before they are eligible to be found, or that there are certain qualities they must exhibit before we will seek them out. It's about trading in our high standards for a strong flashlight and our good examples for a good broom. It's about discovering the joy of finding. Lent is about the Joy of Jesus searching for and finding you and me... And what it cost him. Maybe some of us are destined to be shepherds and others of us to be lost sheep, but there is no end to the joy of being found and finding others. As we discover in the parable of the two lost sons.

Of course we may be tempted to grumble and ask why such a fuss is made over one person. But then we remember that our Shepherd would do no less for us. We cannot help but respond with gladness when our Lord says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost." All of sudden we are rejoicing over you! If you listen carefully you can hear the joy in heaven over finding you.