

September 11, 2022

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

Seeking, Finding, Rejoicing

Today, in our reading from Luke, we have a disagreement about God.

On the one side are the Pharisees and scribes, who say God loves only the good and the righteous and cares little for sinners. On the other side we have Jesus, who says God also loves the lost and doggedly seeks them—like a shepherd searching for lost sheep, like a woman searching for a lost coin—and when they are found, they rejoice. Two different impressions of God. Two different attitudes toward the lost. But only one is Jesus' way.

Jesus taught that God cared about both good and bad people. And he liked to be around them all, both the right people and the wrong people. The religious folks didn't understand it. They didn't get why he would eat with tax collectors and sinners, the selfish and rude and ornery. They weren't worth his time. They would ruin his reputation. They might sully his purity before God. But Jesus didn't seem to care. He seemed to think that their impurities wouldn't affect him; but that his goodness might just affect them. He sought them out, and went to them wherever

he could find. But the Pharisees and scribes didn't like it. They grumbled about Jesus. Look at him, being friendly with the bad guys; the wicked and the lazy, the cheats and the liars, the drunks and thrill-seekers. Those who don't obey God, not like us. Why would Jesus bother with them? Why was he wasting his time?

The Pharisees and scribes grumbled about Jesus. They said, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them," It was one more complaint in a long list of complaints about how Jesus did things. He ignored the Sabbath day rules. He violated the laws about purity by mixing with Gentiles. He gave God's forgiveness to those he had no right to forgive. And he brought in outcasts and adulterers and demon-possessed weirdos. Right into the community. And it was unsettling. It was gross. It was bothersome. It upset the good standing of the people. But Jesus kept insisting that this was God's work. That this is what God wanted most. And shouldn't the Pharisees and scribes want it too? Which one of you does not search for what is lost until you find it? And then which of you does not celebrate when it's found?

Jesus insisted that this is what God does. God wants to find those who get lost or wander off. God wants to find the missing instead of leaving them to their fate. The Pharisees must certainly understand that.

Certainly they would want to do the same. Jesus asks them: “If one of your sheep was missing, wouldn’t you try to find it? Wouldn’t you leave behind your whole flock to go and get it? You would, right?” It’s a funny question. Jesus is daring the Pharisees to say no. To admit they wouldn’t look for the lost. To admit that they would let the one go, and stay with the 99. Because that would make more sense. A shepherd with 99 sheep still has 99 sheep. It doesn’t make much sense to leave them while you look for the one who wandered away. Especially since THEY wandered away and got themselves lost. A good, righteous, godly person wouldn’t do that. A righteous person would have stayed with the flock. But Jesus disagrees. Jesus says it’s not the righteous people that Jesus has come for, but the scattered and missing. He’s not here for the perfect and pious, but for the broken and messed up. The lost causes, the wastes of time. The healthy have no need of a physician. Jesus is on a rescue mission, to seek the lost and rejoice when they are found. Because they

matter to God. They are the ones most in need of a shepherd. Which drives the rest of the flock crazy. The rest of us who try to do the right thing. Where's our reward? Where's our recognition? We did what we were supposed to do and never get lost. We stayed put and were obedient. What about us? What about our love, what about our attention from the shepherd?

Sometimes, like the Pharisees, we resent Jesus welcoming sinners. We resent the idea of him caring for the people who don't deserve it. We resent him seeking out the wanderers and wayward. When we deserve him most. We resent him caring more about the prodigal son than about us, the elder son that stayed home. But until we have lost something we love. Until we have know the pain of loss, the pain of losing something we love; someone we love more than anything, more than our purity, more than our plans, more than life itself, we don't truly understand God.

I got a peek at that a few years ago when our church pig got lost. It wasn't a real pig; it was a pig-shaped piggy bank. And it held all the money people paid for the fair-trade coffee we used to sell. It sat in the

library next to the coffee pots. One day, we noticed it was missing. We looked everywhere for it. We suspected someone had walked off with it. But we couldn't be sure who or when. And we wrote it off as a loss, even though it made us all feel a little less secure, a little less safe. Years passed. One day, out of the blue, a man came to the church and asked to see one of the church leaders. He had some money to return. He admitted that HE had stolen the pig after an AA meeting and now, all these years later, he was trying to make amends for what he had done. He was very sorry and here was all the money he had taken. And I think about how, that wouldn't have been possible if we had shut the church up and kicked out the AA groups. I think about how the lost wouldn't have been found. How there wouldn't have been any return or any rejoicing.

Jesus' purpose is to seek the lost and to find them and rejoice. Even if the search is difficult. Even if it takes years and years, Jesus doesn't give up. He doesn't quit. Because God's love for us is so strong that God will never stop wanting to bring us home. God will never stop pursuing us. It doesn't matter how far we have wandered away. God doesn't stop

loving us or looking for us. And others might not like it. Others might not approve, but God does it anyway. For the one sheep, the one coin. And until you are that sheep or that coin, it may not matter. But if you are, if you are lost, if you are alone, if you are without hope, without peace, without love, then what you need most is the one who can find you and bring you home.

The Pharisees and scribes don't care for the lost. But we see that they are the ones who have become lost. They have lost hope. They have lost the desire to celebrate. They have lost the motivation to welcome sinners or eat with them. They feared getting lost among them. And in the process their fear came true. They made God small and powerless. They put God in a gilded cage. They acted as if God couldn't be in the wilderness or the wastelands. God wouldn't be in the prisons or in the closet or in the back rooms or the bars or the gambling parlors. God couldn't be there with those people because that's not where God goes. But if you've ever been lost, then you know that's where God needs to be. If you've ever been wandering in the wilderness, then you know that's when you need God the most.

Jesus challenges us to think about where he belongs. Is it with the sinners? Or the saints? Is it with the unholy and unrighteous or with the holy and self-righteous? Is it with the outcast who is gracious and humble? Or the pious who excludes and has no grace, only malice?

Jesus says he has come to seek and to save the lost. And there is no one too lost for him to find. No one who is so far gone that they can't be brought back home. And the apostle Paul only understood that after he met Jesus. At first, Paul thought he knew everything. He thought he was right. He persecuted Jesus' followers, and he was lost in our own certainty and pride. He didn't know how lost he was until he experienced God's grace.

Maybe we have had that experience. Maybe we were lost in making money at any cost. Or we were lost in an inheritance battle with our siblings. Or we are lost in schedules so full we can hardly breathe. We can be lost in maintaining a life of perfection. We can be lost in a religion without grace or love. We may be lost in addiction, or anxiety, or lust, or unforgiveness, or bitterness or despair. And still say that everything is fine. But really, we are in the wilderness, wandering

around, despairing more and more every day. But God is in that wilderness with us. That's the good news. God seeks us and finds us however long it takes. God wants to bring us home and rejoice.

The apostle Paul knows what it's like to be lost and found. He thought he was close to God only find he was far, far away. He describes this in his letter to Timothy. He says that Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. I was the most lost, Paul says. The most misguided. The most mistaken and yet God had mercy on me. God sought me out and brought me back, so that I can rejoice too. So that all of us can rejoice with heaven when they come home.

I heard a story the other day of a little boy who was lost in a big city. He was in plaza full of people, crying and crying. He couldn't find his father. A man discovered the little boy and scooped him up and put him on his shoulders. He began calling out the father's name. "Edward, Edward, your son John is looking for you." He repeated it in a sing song way. The people at the café tables began to join in. "Edward, Edward, your son John is looking for you." Then the people standing with their shopping bags. Then the band that was playing took it up. "Edward,



Edward, your son John is looking for you.” The whole plaza was singing the song. And the boy was on the shoulders of the man dancing in the middle of the everything. Finally, the father appeared and rushed to his son. The boy was crying. The father held him in his arms. And the whole plaza of people cheered.

This is the joy of the Kingdom of God. Seeking the lost and finding them. Returning the ones separated to the fold. It is a delight. It is a reason to party. It is the reason Jesus came among us, that God’s grace and mercy and love may be known.