

September 15, 2013

CELEBRATION!!!

by Pastor Clarissa Martinelli

(adapted from Pr. Charles Henrickson and Craig Condon)

A minister died and was waiting in line at the Pearly Gates. Ahead of him was a guy who was dressed in sunglasses, a loud shirt, leather jacket and jeans. Saint Peter addressed the guy, "Who are you, so that I may know whether or not to admit you to the Kingdom of Heaven?" The guy replied, "I'm Joe Cohen, taxi driver, of New York City." Saint Peter consulted his list. He smiled and said to the taxi driver, "Take this silken robe and golden staff, and enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

The taxi driver went into Heaven, and then it was the minister's turn. He stood erect and boomed out, "I am Joseph Snow, pastor of Saint Mary's Church for the last forty-three years." Saint Peter consulted his list and said to the minister, "Take this cotton robe and wooden staff, and enter the Kingdom of Heaven." "Just a minute," said the minister. "That man was a taxi driver and he gets a silken robe and golden staff. How can this be?" "Up here, we work by results," said Saint Peter. "While you preached, people slept. While he drove, people prayed."

Now one of the distinctive features of Luke's gospel is its emphasis on joy. Not that joy is not present in Matthew, Mark, or John. It is. It's just that the note of joy rings out especially clearly in Luke.

Our text is the reading from **Luke 15**, the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. What's going on that prompts Jesus to tell these stories? Well, Jesus has been hanging around with a bunch of sinners, lowlifes, people that polite society back then would look down upon. "Tax collectors and sinners," it says. Tax collectors back then were notorious for being crooked, as well as for working for the enemy, the hated Romans. And the term "sinners" here would refer to open, blatant sinners, people who were known for not living very moral lives. But Jesus was reaching out to these folks, calling sinners to repentance, seeking out the lost, bringing them back home, so to speak, to receive God's forgiveness and to come back into the fold of God's people.

Now you would think everybody would be happy about that. Absolutely not. The pious, respectable, religious folk, those who had never fallen off the morality wagon—some of them were looking a little sideways at Jesus for hanging out with those dirty people. "*The Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, 'This man*

receives sinners and eats with them.'"

So Jesus tells them, and us, these stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, in order to bring out the joy of repentance. There is or there ought to be great joy over sinners who repent. So, Jesus is saying, how come you guys aren't rejoicing and celebrating?

Here's how the story goes. A man has a hundred sheep. One of them gets lost. He goes and searches for that one sheep that is lost. He finds it. And when he does, *"he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing."* So the first one to rejoice is the man who does the searching and the finding.

But he doesn't keep the joy to himself. You know how it is. When you have good news that's just happened, you naturally want to share it with others. Joy is contagious. So the man tells his friends and neighbors his good news about finding his lost sheep. And he wants them to rejoice with him. *"Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost."* More joy. More celebration. The circle expands.

That leads Jesus to the meaning of this story: *"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."* All of heaven rejoices when one sinner is brought to repentance. Will you rejoice in what heaven is rejoicing in? Or will you be a grumbling, self-righteous grouch who thinks you yourself have no need for repentance? That's what this story is about.

As a church family - do we ever grumble? Or do you ever grumble within the church family? Are we happy with church as it is (or as it used to be)? All the good people coming - but please don't reach out into the community and bring in different people, people who maybe don't know how to behave in church, or, perish the thought, sinners!

Likewise, the story of the lost coin. Woman loses coin. Woman searches for coin. Woman finds coin. She rejoices. She invites her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her. *"Just so, I tell you," Jesus says, "there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

The lost sheep and the lost coin. But how do they represent a sinner who repents? I mean, the lost sheep doesn't do anything to make himself unlost, does he? No. Much less, the lost coin. The coin doesn't say, "Well, I seem to be lost. I think I'll go and find the lady who lost me and do her a favor and let her find me." No, that's

not it. The point of the story is not how the lost sheep and the lost coin make themselves unlost. Rather, it's about the diligent searching and seeking that the man and the woman in the story do to find their lost possession. And then their rejoicing when they find what they've been looking for.

Repentance leads to joy. Joy leads to celebration. It's a wonderful thing to be found by Jesus, isn't it? Think of the lost sheep. A lost sheep, off on its own, is in a dangerous place. The sheep is very vulnerable. Will it be able to find green pasture without the shepherd's guidance? Will it be able to keep from getting caught in a thicket without the shepherd's rescue? Will it be safe from wolves and predators without the shepherd's protection? Not for very long. The lost sheep needs someone to come and find him, or else it will be truly lost.

This is you and me – church family. We are like that lost sheep. *“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way.”* That's what sin is: turning aside from God's way, and going it our own way. Like a sheep that gets itself lost, we become separated from God's tender care by our own foolishness and sin. This puts us in a very dangerous place. We were lost, and we couldn't make ourselves unlost. Nothing we can do brings us back to the fold.

But Jesus comes and finds us. He seeks us out; he searches for us. That's why he came, the Son of God did, to rescue us sinners and bring us home. He carries us back home to God, and he does so rejoicing and celebrating. Repentance is being found by Jesus, being rescued and carried back home by him. You and I may experience repentance as something we do, but really it's Jesus who does the heavy lifting.

Jesus does the heavy lifting. Just as he lifted up the load of our sins and carried them to the cross for us. And because Christ, the Son of God, carried our sins to the cross, and there bled and died for them, removing their curse, this is how and why he wants to bring us back home. The lostness is forgiven. Jesus takes it all on him. He wins us our eternal home.

And then he goes and seeks us out, wherever we are, whatever bramble we're caught in, whatever dry, desolate, pastureless place we've gotten ourselves into. The gospel is the searchlight. It's like that lamp that was lit. That's how Jesus finds us. And he rejoices and celebrates –oh, how he rejoices and celebrates– to bring us back home. That's what repentance is like. It's being found by Jesus and being brought back home on his shoulders. And that is a joyful thing.

God is like that with us.

God will search everywhere for his lost children.

God will look in bars, at the racetrack, at the casino, in nightclubs, at work, and on the internet.

God will look for us everywhere we try to escape to.

Because God loves us, God doesn't want us to be lost forever.

When someone comes into the kingdom of God, carried by Jesus in the forgiveness of sins, there is much rejoicing and celebration in heaven. The angels literally cry out in joy, for God's plans have been realized again. What a celebration that must be! A soul that was crushed under the weight of sin has been hauled out of the rubble and revived, never to die again. What was lost is found. What was worthless has now become priceless. What was scorned is now praised.

My friends, this is the joy of repentance. When one sinner repents, Jesus rejoices and celebrates, all of heaven rejoices and celebrates, the angels of God rejoice and celebrates. And Jesus says, "Rejoice with me." You know, I suppose even that little old rescued sheep would do some rejoicing, too. It's kind of nice to be brought back home, safe and sound, on the shoulders of your Savior.

When we set our hearts and desires on God, we enter into the realm of the Holy, where there is a peace that surpasses our understanding.

There is joy in our hearts, much greater than any alcohol, drug or other materialistic thing could ever create.

Let's celebrate the joy Jesus gives us together.

Let's party hearty with Jesus Christ bumping around in our hearts.

Let's tell the world how wonderful it is to have a relationship with Jesus Christ!

To God be given all the glory.

In Jesus' name. Amen.