

Partying with Jesus
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – September 11, 2022

Please Read:
I Timothy
Luke 15:1-10

Today's gospel lesson begins by Jesus' critics saying, "This Jesus receives sinners and eats with them, that is, he parties with them." It reminds you of a moment, elsewhere in the Gospels, where Jesus' critics come to him and say, "The disciples of John the Baptist fast often and say long prayers, but your disciples are always eating and drinking." In other words, we can tell John the Baptist's disciples are religious, they're so miserable! Mark Twain once quipped you could always tell a Puritan by the fact they were always worried that someone, somewhere in the world was having a good time.

Jesus' critics, you see, wanted to know why Jesus and his disciples were always partying? In response, Jesus told some stories. "Which one of you, if he has 100 sheep, and one strays away from the flock, will not leave the 99 sheep in the wilderness - vulnerable to wolves, wandering off, and other all manner of mischief - and go out and beat the bushes until you find your one lost sheep? Then will you not put that sheep on your shoulders, just as if you were carrying a new-found child, and when you see your friends, will you not cry out, "Come party with me! I have found my sheep!" Now which one of you would not do that?

And which one of you, if you are like a woman who has lost a coin, will not be like that woman and rip up all of the carpet in your living room, move all of the furniture out onto the deck, then move all the heavy appliances out of the kitchen, and search relentlessly until you have found that one coin? And when she has found it, she comes running out into the street, calling to everybody up and down Elm Street, "Come party with me! I found my coin!" Now which one of you would not do that??

And which manager among you at Amazon, if you have one of those 1,608,000 employees who is having difficulty getting their work done, will not cancel all of your appointments and projects for the coming quarter and go search out that employee in the cafeteria, and spend every evening, late into the night, working with that individual, until, when budgeting time comes around, all the other managers shout that they want to make that employee head of the department? And when she gets promoted, will you not run out of your office to all of your colleagues and say, "Come party with me! The one who was a Dilbert is now a Jeff Bezos... You see what Jesus is doing here? You know. None of us would do that. None of *us*.

Of course, these two parties, when the shepherd celebrates after finding the lost sheep, and the woman parties after finding the lost coin, prepare us for the most outrageous party of all - the party thrown by the father upon the return of his lost son. We'll save that parable for another day, but Jesus is saying, when just one of these lost - the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost boy - come home, heaven goes wild.

Even us lost types know that these stories, outrageous as they may seem, are about God, about God's amazing capacity to love what no one else in their right mind would love. Notice here that the sheep and the coin did absolutely nothing to help themselves to be found. Really, the work of repentance is simply being found by God!

In other words, only God has the depth of grace and love to redeem and restore the really lost of this world. I've been thinking about how most of us don't think we're lost. GPSs fixed that for most of us, but even GPSs go haywire sometimes... An 80-year-old German motorist ignored warning signs and drove into a sand pile off the highway near Hamburg because that's where his GPS told him to drive... Japanese tourists were heading toward Australia's North Stradbroke Island in the Pacific Ocean. They made it 50 yards offshore before realizing they were stranded. "The GPS told us we could drive there," Yuzu Noda, said, "It kept saying it would navigate us to a road." And so, they literally drove into the sea!

More seriously, we remember the terrorist violence of 21 years ago today. It's a reminder that many are lost in this world with fundamentalism and violent extremism. The Ukraine war grinds on. The Opioid addiction crisis continues in this country. Grief and mourning can be disorienting to the point of feeling lost and alone... We had four death notices this week, not counting Queen Elizabeth. Two of them, Ruth Witt and John Lanaway, are harder because they were well known to many of us. Ruth helped start Special Church, which is celebrating its 35th anniversary this Fall. And I was very close with John, as he was a neighbor and we worked together on Session for the past two years... In fact, John would remind us that...

Religious people get lost, too. The apostle Paul admits that he is the foremost of sinners, "chief of sinners" in the King James translation. Getting found is not about following all the rules or getting it all right. There is a special place in hell for the religious self-righteous, because even Paul knew that we all need forgiveness and grace. That's why we are humbled by the good news that Christ came into the world to save sinners... that's *us*!

And oh yeah, we are as divided and polarized as ever in this country. I'm still pondering the irony of how the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion goals have so divided and angered members of our Board of Education... I was listening to an interesting

podcast of Ezra Klein interviewing philosopher C. Thi Nguyen who specializes in Game Theory. He was explaining how our social media has probably contributed to the increasing divide politically and socially. The game with most social media like TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Instagram is simple. It's about getting a like, a thumbs up or thumbs down. Binary. Social media is not the place for nuance or complex dialogue and reflection. With 80% of the adult population on social media, we are slowly being conditioned to "dumb it down." Like or unlike and move on... Every so slowly, but powerfully, we are being taught to think less and react more, in more and more extreme ways. There are no "points" for patience, questions, kindness or courtesy... Perhaps we are getting more and more lost without even knowing it?

But just when we would prefer to "unlike," "unfriend," write off the books, abandon, and distance ourselves from others, God draws near. God, like a shepherd recklessly searches after the wayward sheep and carries it home (did you know a lost sheep will not follow even when found but must be carried back to a place of recognition?). God, like an old woman searches for that lost coin while the neighbours are thinking, "What's the point?"

Jesus, you see, is trying to help us understand who God *really* is. God really does care about you. God really does love you. Maybe you've been a failure in certain areas of life. Maybe you are suffering from childhood scars. Maybe you have always known you are different and because of your race, your orientation, or abilities you have considered a "minority" and treated with less worth. Maybe you have been a worthless excuse for a husband or wife, or father or mother. Maybe you feel as though nobody in their right mind would trust you anymore, or forgive you, or care for you.

Jesus says, I'm going to find you. If I have to journey from heaven to earth, from the great throne of my eternal kingdom to the bowels of hell, I'm going to keep looking until I see where you are. And if I have to die the most excruciating death imaginable to identify with the pain that you may be feeling in your life, the hell that you're having to live with right now, I'm going to do it. I am going to make you see that you who were once lost, are precious to me. I'm going to find and redeem you - whatever the cost...

I love the fact that in Jesus Christ, God continues to come out of hiding to meet us where we really are as lost as we may be for whatever reason. And when you are lost and then found, that's something to celebrate. When you are set free from despair, frustration, religion, loneliness, grief and division, when you can join with

others who also can tell similar stories of grace and discovery - *that's the makings of a great party!*

So what about you? Each one of us here is either lost and found or lost and just dying to be found. We are the Lost and Found Party! We are the Church! Won't you join the party too?

In the name of the One...