

## “How Much Before We Respond?”

16 September 2007

Luke 15:1-10

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor  
Zion West Walworth United Methodist

### **Luke 15:1-10**

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ 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. “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Prayer.

I am amazed, when I reflect over the course of my life, of the number of people with whom I have built a relationship with, enjoyed the benefit of mutual friendship, yet, they have slowly faded and drifted out of my life.

There was a couple who became quite close to Cynthia and I while I was still in seminary. They attended the church where I served as a student. He worked for Wright – Patterson Air Force Base, and she worked for NCR. I used to forward his contributions to Greenpeace, because if he wrote the check directly, his security clearance would have been compromised. We moved back to New York and we haven’t heard from them since.

I became close to a group of preachers when I served in Dresden and Milo Center. We called ourselves the Lectionary Group because we met weekly over donuts and coffee to discuss the upcoming Biblical lessons for Sunday. Four have retired and one has since died. They’ve kind of just drifted away.

There was the family in Canandaigua; he was a doctor and she was an active volunteer with children’s ministry. He and I used to smoke cigars late at night together, reflecting on the day’s work. They moved to South Bend, IN and have slid to the Christmas card and the annual family picture portion of my life. We haven’t seen each other since.

There was the family in Palmyra. She did fashion and he could build anything with his two hands. Their son and Nick were inseparable. They took jobs in Detroit, where we even visited them one summer, but have since moved on to the suburbs of Chicago.

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Oh, sure there have been some with whom something happened and we've parted with some anger, or, more often, with disappointment. And there have been many with whom I continue to be blessed with their friendship and presence in my life. But I've always wondered about those who just kind of drift away. What is God's larger plan? I can't help but wonder to myself.

I know this can be especially troubling for communities of faith. I think that it impacts the smaller and more closely connected churches more so than the larger, less personal churches. In Canandaigua I proudly boasted of bringing in 100 new members each year. But the dirty little secret was the fact that we were losing 100 each year out the back door. We needed that just to stay even. Yet, I can't remember one occasion where anyone said "Stop. Where did they go? Let's go after them." "Ironic," I always thought to myself, "and the Canandaigua church has the huge stained glass window of Jesus retrieving the lost sheep right in the front of the sanctuary, where it couldn't be missed."

I know how troubling it is for us, when we get a nice new family to settle in, to make some relationships here at Zion, and then, for one reason or another, they stop attending. I must commend you, because without exception, intentional efforts have always been made (since I've been around) for people of Zion to assume the role of the good shepherd, and to go out to retrieve them back in.

God bless you.

Sometimes it works; but mostly not.

But don't let me discourage your efforts. They are not in vain.

We hear the biblical narrative of the woman sweeping her house looking for the lost coin, or of the shepherd leaving behind his 99 to go in search of the one lamb who is missing, and we make the assumption that this is a divine imperative that we chase after those who have become lost to us. The coin has no conscious knowledge, so if it is to be found, it is wholly dependent upon our initiative. The sheep is a dumb animal, most certainly never to find it's way home, so, it too is completely dependent upon our attempts at retrieval.

But then I listen to an equally powerful parable of Jesus, the story of the Prodigal Son, and I see a father who, despite every cell in his body telling him not to let his son go, bites his tongue and lets him go, and then he doesn't go after him. I can't help but stop and ask, "where is the consistency here?" "Dad, go after your son! ... like the good shepherd who goes after the lost sheep, like the woman who searches for the lost coin."

And yet, he watches, and waits, watches and waits, watches and waits, with every expectation that at any moment that rascal son of his will round the corner in the road and return home.

When does one watch and wait? and when does one corral the 99 and set out on a mission to retrieve the one who is lost?

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Let's take another look. We make the assumption that this is a collection of two parables about going after the lost, when in fact; these may be parables about God's joy when a sinner repents. Jesus may be telling us something about God's nature and characteristics, more so than instructing his disciples in policies and procedures that should be followed after he is gone.

Listen carefully to these words of Jesus, "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 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."

Two thoughts.

1. God's joy begins at the find. And it spreads quickly to the rest of heaven.

I don't know where we ever got this impression that our God is an ogre, but it is wrong. Yes, God's history of involvement with humankind, as recorded in the Hebrew / Old Testament scriptures, paints a picture of a God of law, covenant, and judgment. With this as the only lens through which one observes and creates a knowledge base, yes, I can see how one might draw incomplete conclusions about God.

Yet, when put together with the Gospels and the epistle letters of Paul and Peter, we can easily see that God would rather not be in the business of shelling out punitive judgment upon his creation, his beloved children.

God is so much more concerned with our well-being. God sent us his Son, Jesus Christ, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. Our well-being is rooted in living the example of Jesus, creating an environment of forgiveness and dwelling in it, and in the gift of eternal life.

Our God is in the joy business: working in the creating department, and in shipping. There is joy in living his example; reaching out to the lost, the lonely, the outcast, the untouchables, and the unclean. There is joy in serving others, knowing they can never repay you, and they shouldn't try. There is joy in reaching out a helping hand and for someone else to take it.

Isn't there joy in forgiveness? I've heard it said that couples that fight, then make up, love with a lot more passion. I don't know if that is true or not, and I'm modest enough, and smart enough, not to share this out of my personal experience. So I'll leave it at that.

Forgiveness is like opening a locked gate in the barnyard. It allows a relationship to move forward, sharing the road together for a while longer. It sets free souls that stagnate in a pen of purgatory, awkward avoidance, and wounded pride. God experiences such joy with forgiveness that his joy overflows and infects all the souls in heaven. Angels rejoice! and who wouldn't?

2. My second thought is this: Being found isn't about being returned to a former state. The former state was of living in sin. Being found is all about repentance; this is the key to God's joy.

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We downplay the role of repentance, to our peril, in today's society. And yet, it is repentance that holds the key to solving so many of the world's problems. Fundamentalism; either Moslem, Christian, or Jewish fundamentalism will come to an end if all would agree to a process of repentance. Racial and gender discrimination would come to an end with a commitment to repentance. Economic injustice would cease with a universal acceptance of the repentance process.

This is what would bring joy to God, and to all of heaven.

It is time to stop talking politics and to start talking about reconciliation and repentance. That process, which brings such great joy to God, begins with stopping the offense. Repentance begins by ending the oppression. Let go of the power and the pride. Give up the attitude of deserving anything in life; nobody deserves anything. Everything comes from God's grace, not through bloodline or birthright. Loose the sense of privilege. Instead of paying a premium to go to the head of the line, take your place at the end, along with everybody else.

The second step of repentance is a personal resolution ... to never, ever commit the offense again. Make it your personal, internal crusade. Stop the hurting, and vow never to hurt again. Make the vow, and most importantly, keep it.

Thirdly, and this may be some of the most difficult to accept, repair the damage that was done. Make reparations. Make right the wrong that you committed. If you drove over your neighbor's lawn in a drunken joyride, it means re-grading and reseeding their lawn. If your actions caused another to be injured, pay for their hospital expenses and their pain and suffering.

Finally, God is filled with joy when repentance is complete, and that begins when we set out on a new direction. Turn your back upon the old ways, ways that led to pain and sorrow. Turn and face a new beginning. Turn your life around and make a new start .... setting your eyes on the prize, and that is Jesus Christ our Lord.

Finally, let me recognize the fact that we can't force people to behave, or even to return our initiative with a civil response. The person repenting of their sins has to have some kind of cooperation with those whom he or she has victimized.

This is where we simply have to be able to leave the rest up to God. We have to trust God that, by his hand, hearts will be healed and all parties will be able to move on. The reason we fail to get cooperation may be according to some larger, more grand, divine plan. We may never know.

And so, dearly beloved, give God a little joy this morning. As you leave worship today, do so with repentance written upon your heart: Your personal repentance from the sins you've committed; And the repentance of others for the pain they may have caused you.

Repent, and there will be less sin in the world. Repent, and give God some joy, and that will spread to every angel in His heavenly realm! Repent, and God's kingdom will become ... one

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step closer than it was before. This is the Word of the Lord, as it has come to me this day.  
Thanks be to God. Amen.