

Odes to Joy
Luke 15:1-10
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There is a method of teaching parables that is meant for young children, but I find it utterly fascinating for all ages. It was developed by Christian educators Jerome Berryman and Sonja Stewart back in the late 1980s, but it still holds.

The box is the color gold. Gold is very precious and valuable. Perhaps there is something valuable inside. You know, there could be a parable inside. Parables are very valuable. They're worth even more than gold. This box looks old. Parables are old, too, thousands of years old. And yet they are still very, very valuable. I wonder what is inside.

Now, we are invited to glimpse the kingdom of heaven like a child.

There are three parables in this chapter 15 of Luke. We have just heard the first two in our reading today, the parable of the shepherd with a lost sheep and the parable of the woman with a lost coin. The third, the parable of the father with the lost son, or two lost sons, rather, is not for today, but it's good to remember that this triptych – this parable set of three – go together. We might think of these parables as being about God's mercy, God's forgiveness, the relief and new life that comes with repentance, the importance of Christian community. Those are all inside these parables, but for today, especially for today, I am drawn to the final outcome within each of them, which is an invitation. This invitation at each, when the sheep is found, when the coin is in hand, when the son returns, is a call to celebrate. To join in the delight – "rejoice with me for what is lost is found" – we join in that delight of God that God in Christ longs to share with those Pharisees and scribes, with those tax collectors and sinners, and with us.

Theologian Angela Gorrell in her book, *Gravity of Joy*, calls this fifteenth chapter of Luke: Luke's Ode to Joy. This chapter sings with the chorus of heaven and offers three compelling glimpses into the desire of God for us to share in the divine delight. As Jesus attempts to open the hearts of the Pharisees and scribes, who come to him grumbling about the idea that tax collectors and sinners are welcome in this Rabbi's sight, Jesus gives them a glimpse of God's heart and a positively unbelievable priority: joy. In the heart of God there is just joy: no punishment, no desire to include some and exclude others, to expect any particular sacrifice or words of repentance from the wayward sheep or anyone else, but an active pursuit and love for the lost, a hope that the lost will be found. And when they are found, Oh, this is cause for rejoicing! Rejoice with me, says the shepherd, rejoice with me says the woman, rejoice with us, says the father: to the whole household, the whole neighborhood, to every member of the family. What was lost is found, we have to rejoice.

We HAVE to rejoice.

This is a hard day for some of us. September 11th. Not for everyone, of course. An entire generation has no memory of that date, because 2001 was 21 years ago now. But if you're older than your mid 20s you have your own memories of that day, where you were, and the ways that lives were lost, and the losses we felt and continue to feel. We remember things that changed, and the new old fears, including the fears felt by those who were already seen as different in our country.

To be honest, there was some discussion among us in the offices this past month about whether we should have a party at all today, on a Sunday that fell on this anniversary. It's an odd day for a party, a hard day maybe to muster joy. Hard to find it, as we search fields, and corners of the house, and roads up ahead.

A theologian, Joy J. Moore, from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, got lost while driving in our state of Pennsylvania a few weeks ago. She said, "I actually got lost. It's hard to do with GPS. It wasn't intentional and I realized that I was on the highway that is the memorial for those who were on flight 93.

Dr. Moore said that she then saw the marking, the exit, for the memorial. A memorial set like that is to invite people to gather, to come to this place to re-member. And so she did, she turned off for that exit. She went with the reality of not having done a whole lot of travel in the last three years. She reflected, "I was thinking about how we have not gathered, and maybe this fall is an opportunity to gather more this fall than in the last two years. When I arrived, there was something called a Tower of Voices. Maybe some of you have seen it; have heard it. It is this incredible tower that is made of chimes that are completely responsive to the wind – 40 of them. I tried to record this beautiful sound with my phone. My phone picked up the wind. I tried to send the music to people, and they said, 'All I can hear is the wind.' I was having a moment where I thought I was going there to mourn, and I found myself experiencing the unexpected pleasure of being in the place where the gift of lives who sacrificed themselves for others is remembered and there was joy in that, because of the sound caused by the wind of God." And the re-membering.

That's what we gather together for in the church. We gather here to remember and re-member. Remember ourselves as the body of Christ. To put ourselves back together, with God's help, again and again. In the midst of our grief, in the midst of the beauty and the absolute heartaches of being a human being on this planet, God is still breathing God's Spirit in us and through us. That's the rejoicing in heaven.

As those who follow Jesus, we are invited to rejoice in being found. We are invited to rejoice in who else is found. Because of God's love that does not forget us, that does not forsake us, that will sweep every crack and corner and remain hopeful for us even when it looks ridiculous to do so. And the good news is, we are brought back. We are brought back to God, back to others, back to ourselves. Brought back to community, in which we find that divine wholeness in which God revels.

Missiologist Alan Hirsch says, “Party is sacrament.”¹ What if we approached communion, and our common life, with less sadness and grumbling, and more joy and relief. For there is great joy in the Bible when people come to the table, with God’s help, in Christ’s name. In these parables, Jesus scandalously compares God’s kingdom to a party. When someone turns to God, is found by God, restored to the table, a party breaks out in heaven. The angels turn up the music.

We may look strange, continuing to throw a party when the world is shaking its head. It may just sound like the wind to some. When there are more divisions than ever, when so many voices tell us that we should be suspicious of one another, that we should not engage with those who have different beliefs, or party affiliation, or who worship differently than we do, or speak a different language. It’s just the wind.

I interned with a church in seminary I’ve mentioned before, Oakhurst Presbyterian in Atlanta. Thirty years ago it was a church of 40 members. All white members, a church dying, really. In a mostly all-black and immigrant neighborhood. They realized if their church were going to survive, they were going to have to be very different, look very different. Their strategy for church growth, inviting those neighbors who didn’t look twice at the old relic on the block? How would they do that? It started with a party. They threw a block party, outside, and especially invited their neighbors from that block. Popcorn, games, prizes, nothing really fancy. And then they threw another party. And another one. And pretty soon, people wanted to know what these crazy white people were doing in there. And then their neighbors who had come to the party, who stepped inside, said they wanted to help plan the next party. And the next one. They became a thoroughly multiracial congregation, now 350 members strong. It didn’t happen overnight. It took more than 10 years. But 10 years of parties. Also tears, also hard conversations, also struggles over music styles and choirs and air conditioning. But they never left the joy outside.

This is the party God intends, that we rejoice in one another, in the presence of God. Each one of us matters, the presence of each one of us is part of the joy, for you are worth celebrating, says God. May the church proclaim this good news that God gives us. You are worth celebrating. This is a party for you, too. When we share joy together, we can then bear all the rest of life. We feel that divine joy is for us, is with us, in the midst of all things. When we feel that, and share it, then we can then do those hard and good things together, for God’s sake, and for the sake of those yet to come. For we are the parable, too. May this parable of the church be a glimpse, may it be a foretaste, may it be a precious treasure of heaven’s rejoicing, when all are united in the joy of God.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

¹ The Bible Has a Clear and Consistent ‘Party Theology’ | Christianity Today
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/march/kyle-idleman-one-at-time-bible-party-theology.html> (accessed September 10, 2022).