

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose
September 18, 2016
The Joy of God's Love
Luke 15:1-10

Dear friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

When Chloe and Henry were 3 and 1 and a half, they shared a room. Henry was in a crib - Chloe in a toddler bed. This arrangement worked out fairly well - until one day.. They had been down for a nap, and after a while I started thinking that it was just too quiet. And yet - just in case they were sleeping, I didn't really want to open the door. But, after a while of hemming and hawing, "Do I wake them up?" "Do I let them rest?" I decided to open the door.

I found Chloe and Henry with the contents of an entire tube of diaper rash cream... the cream was all over them. Chloe had it in her hair. Henry had it on his crib. It was on the floor (thankfully it was hard wood floor.) It was all over their bodies and their clothes. It was everywhere. Did you know that diaper rash cream is really hard to clean up? You know, I could have been really mad at them that day, but all I could do was laugh (and take a picture, of course!) Sometimes it's just funny when the kids are in trouble and all you can do is laugh.

When we find Jesus in our gospel reading today, he's been getting into a whole lotta trouble - except nobody's laughing. He's been breaking all kinds of rules, left and right. "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them!" Eating with people in those days was sort of a cultural important thing - you just don't eat with people if you don't want to honor them.

The Pharisees and scribes - the Jewish religious leaders - were getting upset. Those pharisees were very concerned with rules. Those religious rules were NOT to be broken. So here's a religious guy that claims to be from GOD - and he's breaking all kinds of rules. This is not okay!

Usually, when we are introduced to someone new, as a way of indicating that we are, indeed, friend and not enemy, we smile and extend our hand in friendship. The gesture is usually reciprocated and an initial bond is established. We are both human and we both acknowledge the existence of the other and the ritual of welcome. A pastor friend of mine learned once that this is not a universal way of greeting people. If you are a deeply orthodox Jew, you are breaking an important rule by shaking the hand of a woman who is not your wife. As it happened, when my friend extended her hand in greeting, the orthodox Rabbi, to whom she was being introduced, accepted her hand and the shaking hands ritual was welcomed and a wonderful friendship has developed. Only later did she learn that the rabbi had made a decision to break a religious rule in order not to insult her and in order not to send a less friendly message.

Sometimes, as the old saying goes, rules are made to be broken.....especially if you break the rules in order to enter into the holy. A welcoming moment is just that...holy. Synagogues and churches and schools and libraries and government bureaus and commercial offices and committees and families and just about any place where two or three people gather, have rules. But when is it acceptable to break a rule and who decides when that is?

All of this is going through the minds of these Pharisees as they enter into this encounter with Jesus. The Pharisees are grumbling about Jesus' rule breaking behavior. So Jesus, trying to figure out how to teach them a lesson, decides to tell them a few parables, or stories.

In the first parable, the sheep is lost, and she probably knows she's lost. She was probably grazing with all the others, looking down at the grass and slowly munching, gradually moving away from the flock accidentally. Sheep are born with a herd instinct, so she probably didn't mean to get separated from the others; she was just concentrating her own food, when—all of a sudden—she looked up and nothing and no one around her was familiar. More than a few of us probably have childhood stories about similar moments in a grocery store or a game or a museum. We can imagine the kind of panic she must have felt at that moment. One moment we think we are safe and protected in familiar territory with our clan all around, and then, in a moment, we realize we are on our own in unexpected terrain.

The story of the lost coin shows us quite a different way of being lost. The coin is lost but has no idea that it's not where it's supposed to be. It never suspects that being under the couch or behind the dresser is distressing anyone, and it has no intention of taking any steps to be anywhere else. It is oblivious to its location and its importance. We may be lost like this sometimes too—with no sense at all that we are not where we are meant to be, no awareness that where we are and what we are doing is wreaking havoc on someone else's life.

So talking about these two parables at the same time is tricky, since they are not exactly about the same condition. The definition of "lost" is broad: it can mean unable to be found; not knowing where you are or how to get to where you want to go; unable to find your way; no longer held, owned, or possessed. There are so many ways to be lost and to lose.

Most of us probably have a wide range of stories about being lost or of losing someone or something else. They may vary from the very simple—lost keys or gloves or that one sock from the dryer—to the profound and deep: the loss of a good job or a home or a spouse or a dream. I bet I'm not the only one here who could speak of taking a few wrong turns and getting lost, both literally and metaphorically.

When I was younger, I loved when I got to see my cousins - it was usually only a couple times per year - so when we were together, it was really an exciting and special time. One summer when we were all visiting Grandma & Grandpa, my cousins and I decided to play a game of Hide and Seek. We decided you could hide inside or outside—trying to maximize our options in our grandparents pretty modest home and increase the challenge and the fun. I headed outside to hide. There was a fence around their backyard, and found this amazing hiding spot, wedged between the shed and the fence.

I heard the house door open as my cousins came out and began searching the yard. "They'll never find me here..." I thought and smiled to myself. A few minutes later, I heard the door again as they went back inside. Aha! I fooled them!

As the time continued to pass, I realized I hadn't heard the door in a while. And it had been a while. Quite a while.

Finally, I decided to leave my perfect hiding spot and go inside. I walked through the door and found my cousins playing "Hi Ho Cherry O" around the kitchen table. They had given up and forgotten to tell me to come back inside.

So let me tell you: The point of the game Hide and Seek is not to have the best hiding place. The point is, ultimately, to be found.

This is the point of our story this morning - When the thing that is lost is found, there is amazing joy! Jumping up and down joy. Screaming like you won the lottery joy. Throwing a party - telling the neighbors - running up and down the street - your football team just got a touchdown kind of joy. This is who God is.

The good news in this story is really not about the losing or the lost. The good news in these stories is about the finding. The action verbs are about what the Shepherd does - and not the sheep: leave, go after, find, put across your shoulder, rejoice, come home, call your friends and neighbors, light a lamp, scour the house, look in every nook and cranny, celebrate.

God is relentless and reckless. God loves us like crazy. God pursues those who are undeserving, careless, hiding, thoughtless, half-committed, inattentive, ungrateful, unresponsive. He pursues the wanderer, the lazy, the irresponsible, the less than perfect, the undesirable, the prodigal, the flagrant sinner, those who are fearful or too proud to turn to God. And the best part - sometimes the most unbelievable part - God loves YOU. Yep. YOU. You can't go anywhere or do anything that will make God stop loving, pursuing, going after, finding, and then celebrating YOU.

This is who God is. This is what God does, with each and every one of us. There is no time, no place, no circumstances, that we can be lost and God is not looking for us. Before we were born, we were each God's child - God's cherished son or daughter. Whenever we are lost - or even feeling lost, God comes looking for us - finds us - puts us across his shoulder - rejoices - comes home - and calls us together to celebrate.

May we know - today and every day - the joy of God's amazing love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.