

Luke 15:1-32

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.”

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and

refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Welcome Back - September 15, 2019

Luke 15:1-32

We have a dog at home, actually, two dogs, Buzz and Jessie. They are small dogs, Shih-tzus to be exact and we've had them for about ten years. Mischievous is hardly the right word for them, especially Jessie. I can't count the number of times when we've returned home only to find Jessie has broken into Kelly's knitting bag and scattered the yarn all over the living room. Buzz is quite sneaky when it comes to food. If I am watching TV in the Family Room and bring a snack with me, I have to make sure that whenever I get up, I take my food with me and place it on a high table. Otherwise, Buzz will very quickly make a beeline for the plate and gobble down whatever is on it.

Now don't get me wrong, they are wonderful dogs and we wouldn't trade them for the world. However, they do get into their fair share of trouble and we necessarily have to forgive them over and over and over again.

Today we have three familiar parables of Jesus. They are all united by the same theme: God extends to us extraordinary love and generosity in terms of searching for us when we are lost and welcoming us once we are found. That much should be clear,

Jesus talks about a shepherd with one hundred sheep. One gets lost and the shepherd leaves the other ninety-nine and goes searching for the lost one. We don't know who, if anybody, is looking after the ninety-nine good ones. We just know that the shepherd's first and only concern is for the lost sheep. He makes the sheep his number one priority and is willing to risk losing the ninety-nine for the sake of finding the one lost sheep. Naturally when he finds it, he wants to celebrate and Jesus tells us that whenever that which is lost has been found, all the angels in heaven rejoice.

Likewise, Jesus tells us about a woman who lost a silver coin. Now the value of that coin was worth about a day's wages back then so it was not an insignificant amount of money. The woman dropped everything to search for the coin and when she found it, she also rejoiced with her friends and Jesus repeats that when the lost are found, heaven itself is full of joy.

What is very interesting is that at the beginning of the scripture, we are told that Jesus is speaking to two distinct audiences — two audiences who could not be further apart from each other.

One group of listeners were the Pharisees and scribes, the leaders of the religious establishment of Jesus' day. These men held positions of power and authority. It was they who read and interpreted the meaning of the God's law. It was they who studied literally centuries of precedent and tradition. They, therefore, considered it their right and their duty to determine the ones whom

God favored and the ones whom God rejected. Of course, they considered themselves to be on the inside.

The other group were those whom the establishment considered to be outsiders: the tax collectors and other sinners. I'm sure that the sinners included prostitutes, included shepherds, and included just about anyone else who was different somehow from what they called normal. Jesus was frequently criticized by the establishment because Jesus had no hesitation talking to anybody and everybody wherever they were. Yes, Jesus hung out at bars. Yes, Jesus had friends who made their living as thieves. Yes, Jesus touched and healed people who were not Jewish, and yes, Jesus made even tax collectors feel welcome. No wonder the establishment grumbled! Jesus had no problem taking the initiative by reaching out to the so-called dregs of society instead of waiting on them to come back on their own. Jesus extended peace and welcome to people who seemed far apart from God. Yet, Jesus loved them anyway.

Of course, all this is reflected in the parable of what many of us know as the "prodigal" or rebellious son. It is unfortunate that we remember the story with that title, because it could easily have been called the parable of the forgiving father or even the parable of the jealous brother. There are many ways to look at the story. We know the outline: the younger son of a wealthy man asks his father for his portion of his inheritance early and goes out and spends it all, winding up broke in a foreign land feeding pigs and even eating what he fed them. At some point he remembered that he had a wealthy father and decided to go back to his home and at least make the offer to become his father's servant.

The father, upon learning that his son was coming back, doesn't wait for him to come in the front door but instead rushes to meet him and throws a welcoming feast in his honor, not even considering the son's offer to work as a servant. Meanwhile, the elder son, upon hearing about the return of his brother and the feast, complains that he remained loyal to his father yet never received anything from him. The father assured the elder son of his love for him, invited the elder son to join the feast, but we don't know whether the elder son came or not, or just stayed mad.

For that matter, we don't know whether the younger son, the so-called prodigal son, was actually sincere in offering to be a servant to his father instead of resuming his place in the family. Maybe it was a well-rehearsed speech designed to get him in the door, maybe he meant it. We don't know.

From the parable, the only thing we do know that that the father, like shepherd with the lost sheep and the woman with the lost coin, rejoiced and threw a party to celebrate. Everything else is just speculation.

Our task today is not to ascertain the motives of the prodigal son or wonder whether the elder brother relented — though many sermons have been preached on both. Rather, we need to figure out how to understand and relate to a God who, according to Jesus, will drop everything to be in relationship with us and forgive us for whatever damage we have caused. We have a word for it in the Church, we call it “grace” and it’s a hard word to understand.

We say that what we do here at Collingswood is to proclaim the “good news” about Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Church Universal supposedly exists to tell the world about the God of love who wants to be in relationship with everybody, regardless of what they have done in the past. Such is the picture these parables paint for us: God will go to any length, climb every mountain, ford every stream, and even search high and low, to have a relationship with us. Yet is that what we see happening in our world today? Is how the Church is acting?

If God welcomes back everybody, regardless of their past, regardless of their present, regardless of their race, color, creed, nationality, or sexual orientation, then how can some churches condemn those who don’t agree with them politically? If the God of Jesus Christ welcomes everybody, then how can some churches insist that they only want members who have the same income, or same race, or same tribe, or same dress, or same attitudes as everyone else in the congregation. If the God of Jesus Christ truly welcomes everybody, then how can some churches ignore the cries of people who have been the victims of sexual abuse, discrimination, and other forms of deliberate exclusion and denial?

Such, my friends, is the perception of the Church of Jesus Christ held by many people today — by the sixty percent of our nation without a church connection and even by some of the forty percent on the inside. Many people, perhaps most people, are simply aware that a thing called “The Church” exists and that “The Church” claims to follow the teachings of a good man called Jesus. Yet, it does not take very much evidence to conclude that the Jesus of the Bible who preached about a gracious, forgiving, welcoming, extravagant God and actively seeks to include everyone is certainly not the Jesus many churches talk about and claim to follow. Instead, there is a wide gap between the Jesus of the Bible and the Jesus of the Church. Is it little wonder that many people who call themselves spiritual and believe in some kind of God definitely want nothing to do with us as the Church?

At the same time, there are even many people who attend worship and are on the rolls of churches who feel equally alienated and confused. They hear the scriptures about this welcoming God. They hear over and over again about this Jesus who chooses to associate with the supposed outcasts of

society. They long personally for a place where they can be at peace. They seek a God who loves them unconditionally. Yet when they choose to get involved with a particular congregation, instead of feeling welcomed and cared about, they experience rejection, frustration, and burnout.

Is it possible, is it even likely, that we, the Church of Jesus Christ, are the in fact problem standing in the way of our relationship with God instead of our being the solution? Is the Church Universal as welcoming and gracious as Jesus tells us to be, or not? Is this congregation, this Collingswood Presbyterian Church as welcoming and gracious as it can be, or not?

To be honest, as your pastor, it is not my place to say. Only you as worshippers can decide for yourselves the extent to which we are being how gracious and radically welcoming to our own members and to our community. Only you can decide for yourselves how gracious and radically welcoming you are personally to your family, friends, and colleagues who want nothing to do with Church because of what has gone on and continues to go on. Only you can decide for yourselves whether you want or need to change, whether you want or need to ask God to show you how to open your heart more, whether you want or need to follow the gracious, loving example of Jesus more closely day by day.

Time and again, Kelly and I welcome and rewelcome our dogs Buzz and Jessie, no matter what they have done. They are, after all, just dogs and they have hardly done anything that will wreck our lives. For us and for them, offering grace and forgiveness is easy.

But embracing the grace and radical acceptance as proclaimed by our Lord and Savior is not so easy. Following Jesus by welcoming the stranger, forgiving and praying for our enemies, and daring to eat and drink with people whose behaviors we question is unquestionably hard work.

Yet this is truly the work of the Church. This is what grace is all about. Who else is going to do it? Not governments, not workplaces, not even most families. Jesus Christ has appointed us, yes us, to be the ones who show the world that because of God's love and grace, life can be different and life can be better. We are the ones who can show humanity that trust and love triumph over suspicion and hate. We can continue to build up this our Collingswood congregation to be the grace-filled, inclusive, loving community that welcomes the stranger, supports the needy, forgives each other, and proclaims Jesus Christ in everything we do and say. We're off to a good start. Let's keep going. Jesus is showing us His Way. Let us follow and find.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.