

## “Come and Rejoice With Us!”

Sermon by the Rev. DWHinkle  
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**Scripture:** Luke 15:1-10 and 1 Timothy 1:12-17

When the text says “*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him,*” it means, the people everybody hated and those the good people wanted nothing to do with - were coming near to listen to Jesus. People we don’t want to touch, and the despised, political collaborators with Rome were attracted to Jesus. How can this be? What makes them want to be near Jesus, and why does he allow it?

Jesus’ strange behavior hadn’t escaped the notice of the more educated and religious people in the audience. They began finding each other, gathering in little clicks, and grumbling about it. “*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*” Ordinarily, the grumblers were fierce rivals with each other, but now they formed temporary connections to grumble about Jesus’ strange behavior. He associates with the riff-raff! How disgusting!

Jesus sees them forming little groups, turning their backs toward him, and then looking his way as they whisper to each other. He knows they’re forming fake community by excluding those they consider unacceptable. They think they’re being religious and modeling themselves after God. This is the very thing Jesus has come to expose. He decides to tell them a parable, a riddle.

Jesus starts with a question. “*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?*” Dead silence! No one raises their hand.

If you own a hundred sheep and they were grazing in the open desert, would you risk losing the ninety-nine to rescue the one? No. Absolutely not. The idea of leaving the ninety-nine to seek the one is preposterous. No one in their right mind would do that. It’d be crazy, foolish, and very bad business practice. Unfortunately, we all know that sometimes it’s necessary that a few get lost for the sake of the many, right? We call them ‘collateral damage.’ But, Jesus puts the question in a way that makes it sound like you should leave the ninety-nine and rescue the one. “*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?*”

Where’s Jesus going with this? Already the story has an edge, and the edge is sharpened when the shepherd puts the full-grown, ‘was lost but now is found’ sheep on his shoulders and carries it home, rejoicing no less. Do you know how heavy a full-grown sheep is? They weigh nearly as much as a man. And they stink.

Ugh! Can you imagine your average shepherd rejoicing at having to carry this sheep for miles? This is a very strange shepherd.

Then this strange shepherd does one more thing even stranger. When he gets back home he calls together his friends and neighbors and asks them to party with him in celebration at finding his one lost sheep.

Shepherds were a rough lot. They were defensive, tough on the outside, smelly, and, of course, not the sentimental type to get all teary eyed about recovering one, lost sheep. Everyone of Jesus' audience would know this shepherd doesn't match any shepherd they've ever known. They're probably thinking this doesn't make sense. In fact the story has taken them into a world that feels surrealistic. Using modern terms, Jesus has transported them into the world of science fiction where they're not sure of the rules, and surprises can ambush you.

They were wondering where Jesus was going with this, and now, he tells them. *"Just so, I tell you,"* says Jesus. This is his way of saying, listen up; here's the point. *"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."*

Do you think joy's a category the crowd thinks much about? I suspect it's a word they don't use that often. And it isn't just "joy," it's "more joy." Somewhere, someone is full of more joy then you can imagine over one person repenting. Joy's a relational category and suggests delight, effervescence, and being seen with a twinkle in your eye! Joy's a three year old who lights up when they see mommy or daddy enter the room. Joy's the opposite of shame, and a wonderful thing! Our tax collectors and sinners aren't used to being looked at with joyful eyes, eyes that delight in seeing them. No. They're used to being seen with dead eyes full of disdain; and in response, they look down in shame. They know who they are and how others view them. But Jesus looks at them differently.

Could this be what attracts the tax collectors and sinners? They sense that Jesus likes them, loves them even, in a deep and joyful way, even though he knows who they are and what they've done. He doesn't look at them with the same eyes with which they look at themselves. They see in his face the delight the shepherd displays upon finding the one sheep he'd risked all to find. When he looks at them, they feel precious. Could this be why they come close and listen to him? Does he delight in them simply because they're human and not because they're good? Could this be how God looks at us, too?

And where is this joy coming from? It's coming from heaven; God's place, that place radically different from our own. Our place is so full of rivalry and contention and fighting and murder and heartache and pain. But God's place is different. God's place is where God's rule of love is lived, and those rules are quite opposite. We're only beginning to learn how they work. Heaven points toward

God's coming age and how the world will work then. We see glimpses of it in this age.

And how can it be that one sinner who repents is the occasion for all this joy? God's joy is not found in the group, but in the one, and it's the rejected one, at that. Maybe in God's world the outcasts and asylum seekers don't get cast out. Maybe they're welcomed.

Repentance is always about changing our minds. It's where we rethink things and come to new conclusions. It can be an "ah ha" where the pieces suddenly come together, or it can be a gradual process where our world gets reconfigured, the hard drive wiped clean and new software installed. This new software is of a different order and allows us to see things we'd never seen before. The joy coming from heaven celebrates the installation of new software. It's like going from black and white to radiant color on a high-definition monitor. Like when Dorothy opened the door and reveals the land of Oz for the first time.

Is this whole story about the character of God? That might explain the strangeness of this shepherd.

And why do the ninety-nine righteous persons need no repentance. Is it true that "only those who are not good in their own eyes can allow themselves to be forgiven?" Maybe the ninety-nine righteous people like their world the way it is. They're quite happy grumbling to each other and building their pseudo-unity around the excluded "*tax collectors*" and "*sinners*." That's not a very joyful world, is it? But at least they know the rules, they define them, enforce them, and they benefit from them.

But Jesus makes it sound like the ninety-nine are missing something. Maybe they're missing the "joy of being wrong," (James Alison) the joy of discovering the overwhelming love, delight and mercy of the God of the universe.

This is how I feel about this non-violent, non-sacrificial understanding of God that I've been sharing with you. For me it's the coin that got lost and now's found. It's the stray sheep we must leave the ninety-nine behind to find; and having found it, we discover we want to call our friends and neighbors to come and celebrate with us. Our friends and neighbors look at us like we're crazy. They don't understand the importance of what we're discovering. With this new understanding there are no tax collectors and sinners, there are no missing coins, there are no black sheep stranded and alone. With the woman in the story, I find myself exclaiming, "*Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that has been lost*" and I've looked for all my life.

I believe the church largely lost the coin 1700 years ago when it became the state religion of the Roman Empire. But now we're finding it again. I'm seeing evidence of our finding it everywhere I go. Even from the Pope and his advocating against violence and for reconciliation and peace. We're in a period of repentance,

of changing our minds about God, ourselves, and our neighbors. We're discovering that Jesus never was like that two-faced God of vengeance, but that God has always been like Jesus! Do you get what that means? Do you see how that translates to a different way of looking at the world?

Yes, this is the new thing into which we're being inducted week by week. The Gospel itself is the lost coin, the ninety-nine sheep that must be left in order to find the one that's gone missing. And we're in the process of finding it. No wonder we call our friends and neighbors and ask them to come and rejoice with us. Amen!?

**Sources:**

NRSV of the Bible

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