

Teaching: Winter-Spring 2021



The theme for the coming term will be to explore what it means to 'leave the ninety-nine'. We will look at what this tells us about the heart (motivation) of God and the mission of God. We will explore welcome – who is welcome and what does welcome actually mean. We will look at examples of how Jesus engages with 'the least, the last and the lost'.

Sunday 21st March, 2021

Reading: (NRSV) Luke 15: 7, 10, 22&23

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

7 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.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

The Parable of the Lost Son

22 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. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

Questions:

1. Sally explains that there is a clear difference between the celebrations in the first two parables and the celebration in the third. What differences do you observe?
2. It is said that 'People read into things, what they will' so perhaps it is no wonder that the tax-collectors, sinners and Pharisees to whom these parables are addressed, hear different things. What affects or blocks our reading and hearing of these parables as Jesus intended?
3. Sally said, 'The generosity that was lavished on the son that was lost outside the household is now also extended to the son who was lost inside the household.' What do you think she meant by that? Have you ever felt that being 'lost inside the household' applied to you?
4. Sally ended by saying, 'Do you know that God is seeking you, searching for you? Do you know that God wants to celebrate finding you and invite you to his party, with a robe, a ring, sandals and a feast?' Is this, for you, a distant memory or do you still experience this in your life today? How?

Prayer:

We read that the son says to his father:

Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

This is a prayer of confession. He identifies those things he has done wrong and comes to a conclusion about the implications that this has for his standing. In some sense he is right, but in another of course he is wrong. The fact that he comes to his father and repents shows that he is perfectly qualified to be forgiven and restored; which is exactly what we read in the story.

Some prayers of confession and repentance:

Lord our God,
in our sin we have avoided your call.
Our love for you is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that goes away early.
Have mercy on us;
deliver us from judgement;
bind up our wounds and revive us;
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Take your time with this one – its long – and needs to be carefully considered:

Almighty and most merciful Father,
we have wandered and strayed from your ways like lost sheep.
We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.
We have offended against your holy laws.
We have left undone those things that we ought to have done;
and we have done those things that we ought not to have done;
and there is no health in us.
But you, O Lord, have mercy upon us sinners.
Spare those who confess their faults.
Restore those who are penitent,
according to your promises declared to mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord.
And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake,
that we may live a disciplined, righteous and godly life,
to the glory of your holy name.
Amen.

Read through Psalm 103, especially vs 11-14

Text of the Sermon:**Celebrating the found – Luke 15: 7, 10, 22+23**

This is the last session of the series that we've been focussing on since the start of the year – "Leave the 99". We've been reassured that the 99 are safe, in good hands and in God's hands, while the shepherd goes and searches for the lost sheep. We've looked at some examples of who the lost sheep in the parable might represent in our present day lives.

Today I'm going to look at three parables that Jesus told, seemingly back to back, about something that was lost and then found. I'm not so much going to work through the particular meaning and application of each parable, but I'm going to look across the three parables at the celebration and joy of finding what was lost. Have you ever lost something? Keys, phone...? I lost one of my children...

These three parables we're looking at today are in Luke 15; the parable of the lost sheep (the one we've become very familiar with lately), the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the lost/prodigal son. In each parable, when the thing or person was found, Jesus explained in the parable a glimpse of heaven and the celebration that takes place when they were found. But there are subtle differences between the three stories that I just want to draw out.

In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus says in v7 "In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over 99 others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!" In the lost coin parable, Jesus describes in v10 "In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents"

And in the lost son parable, in v22+23 Jesus describes, not so much a celebration in heaven, but a celebration as part of the story. He doesn't say "in the same way..." as in the previous two parables, he makes the celebration part of the story – v22 "but his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. V23 And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast..."

In the first two parables, Jesus draws a parallel between the finding of the lost item and the resultant joy in heaven when one sinner repents. Then he changes the story in the final parable, to a much more person-focussed reaction of the father to the son. A robe, a ring and sandals, a fatted calf and a feast. Earlier in the parable, the father had already ran to his returning son and kissed him and embraced him. Such a more personal, heart-impacting description of the father's love and response. Why the difference? Let's rewind a bit...

Jesus knew his audience and told parables that he knew his listeners would understand and be impacted by. In this chapter, Luke 15, Jesus is addressing the Pharisees. They were God fearing, devout law abiding believers. Obsessed with obeying the letter of the law of Moses and some other cultural practices that had woven their way into their practices. They overtly, obviously and ostentatiously practiced their religion for everyone to see. They wanted to be seen as being righteous and obedient, and believed that in doing so they would earn their place in the Kingdom of Heaven. The Pharisees didn't want to associate with tax collectors and sinners and Jesus knew that they struggled with the concept that sinners of all kinds were welcome in God's kingdom too. In fact, more than welcome. God actively sought them out. He pursued them. He left the 99 to search for them. He ran towards them and welcomed them with a robe, a ring, sandals and a fattened calf for a feast. To the Pharisees this would have been quite a surprise to hear, and a bitter pill to swallow. More joy in heaven for the sinner than for the righteous?

Jesus told many parables to describe God's Kingdom – to show how different it is to the way the Pharisees and other religious leaders thought it was. Parables divided the listeners based on their responses. For example, the short parable of the debtors that Jesus told when the sinful woman was washing his feet with her tears in Luke 7. He wanted Simon the Pharisee to see that God loves to forgive those people who have more sin, more debts to pay, as much as he does those that have few sins or debts. Parables were evocative too. Jesus made certain points much clearer to the true-hearted people than plain language could have. He told parables to make people think. He knew not everyone would hear the message. Some people tune their hearts and ears to God's word whilst others block their ears and hearts to God's word. Jesus quoted Isaiah to explain why he told parables. "They have eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear" (Isaiah 6:8-10). Parables either open spiritual eyes and ears or people shut their eyes and ears tighter to ignore the message. Parables – often described as stories with spiritual principles with heavenly meaning - have the ability to reveal information to those ready and willing to hear. Jesus wanted to communicate with the common person, but also to assert his authority in telling a message that countered/came against people's preconceived ideas. This is clever story telling in that it reveals information in different ways to different people. Something that God continues to do through his word today.

Parables also offer good news to those who feel unredeemable and lost. They can see, in these parables, a God who passionately searches for them and others like them. What they also do is disorientates people who are offended by God's remarkable generosity – especially when the meaning of the parable reaches out to the tax collectors and sinners. And we all know they aren't the Pharisees favourite people. Jesus makes the point again and again that God welcomes sinners. He needed to get that message through to both sinners (those far from God), who could know of God's love and searching for them, and Jesus needed to get the message through to the religious leaders to emphasise that people (pointing at the Pharisees) who reject repentant sinners are out of line with the Kingdom of God. The Pharisees were clearly not celebrating when tax collectors and sinners drew near to Jesus. They hadn't grasped the concept of compassion and mercy and that salvation wasn't attained through merit, but through grace.

So, in telling three parables back to back, three similar stories of lost treasures, Jesus is making sure the audience hear his message. We know that these three parables are intended for two audiences. Jesus has a stern message for the Pharisees, so much so that he needs to tell it in three ways. But he softens the message by framing the parables around three gentle and unforgettable characters – the shepherd, a woman and a father who are distraught and searching for their lost treasure. In the final parable – the one of the lost/prodigal son, I reckon Jesus is thinking that the Pharisees haven't quite understood the heart of God in the first two parables. In the beginning of the chapter they were grumbling about Jesus associating with the tax collectors and sinners, even eating with them! He needs to get the message across that the returning son is welcomed back into the family with the items he was given, restoring his place of honour as a son. The father gives the son the finest robe, it would normally have belonged to the father himself, but in giving it to the returning son it affirms him as a son and heir and a cherished member of the family. The ring also indicated status as a son and heir. So the father wasn't just throwing a party, he was reinstating and reaffirming the lost son's place in the family.

Jesus doesn't just end the parable with the celebration feast and all is good in the world. He further extends the story in this final parable to focus on the conversation between the father and the older brother. This son angry when he heard his younger brother had returned to such a welcome. He had obeyed all along, been obedient, done everything right. And the father in the story affirmed him all the same. He reminded him that he was his son and that everything he had belonged to him anyway, and he invited him to the party. The generosity that was lavished on the son that was lost outside the household is now also extended to the son who was lost inside the household. This is a classic case of living in the father's house and failing to understand the father's heart. Jesus knows what the Pharisees are thinking – how can God forgive and celebrate the saving of these sinners and ignore us who have been obedient to the law all our lives. So, by adding in this little prologue to the parable, the Pharisees can see that God loves the lost and celebrates them when they are found, but God is faithful to honour those who believe and are diligent in their faith. They are invited to the party too.

You know how I came to be a Christian? I was kind of one all along... we went to church most Sundays as a family, growing up in a traditional church-going community in SA. When I was a teenager I realised I needed to make my own confirmation of faith and I was baptised and I've been journeying with God ever since. I know of some people who've had amazing 'voice from heaven, lightning in the sky' Damascus road transformations, and I've sometimes thought how I'd love to have their story. A much more exciting story to tell, one of great forgiveness, revelation and redemption. But my story is mine, and I know from these parables that God delights in me all the same. God is the same, yesterday today and forever. He loves and celebrates everyone who was once lost. I'm invited to the same party.

The bible is full of references to how much God loves us (all people) and how He rejoices over us. Here are a few:

Isaiah 62:5 "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you"

Zephaniah 3:17 "He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing"

There is more joy in heaven and there is joy in the presence of God's angels for every single person that comes to know Christ and his redeeming grace. What a party!

Do you know that God is seeking you, searching for you? Do you know that God wants to celebrate finding you and invite you to his party, with a robe, a ring, sandals and a feast? Is there someone you know that needs to know this? If you'd like to talk to someone about this, you can get in touch with the church via the website and someone will be available to talk and pray with you and help you on that journey.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, thank you for your word. That it shows us who you are, our loving father who wants nothing more than to welcome us home, to show your love for us, make us your children and celebrate with all the angels that you have found us. Thank you that your word also tells us that all who believe in you and accept you are given the right to be called children of God.

Please open our eyes and ears to hear your word and our open our hearts to help others on their journey towards your kingdom party.

Thank you for speaking to us today