

“The Joy of the Lost and Found”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
14th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19C) – 14 & 15 September 2019
Exodus 32:7-14; I Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Think of a moment when you experienced great joy. Perhaps it was your wedding day or the marriage of someone you love, or the birth of a child, grandchild, or great-grandchild, or a baptism that inspires us with joy as we witness rebirth, the transformation that occurs through the waters of that most sacred mystery. Joy explodes with immense intensity when we hear the words, “the test results came back benign,” or “your cancer is in remission.”

Sometimes, joy sneaks up on us and bursts forth for no identifiable reason, or during our prayer and meditation, we receive the gift of peace and joy that comes with clarity about how to handle a situation that’s been troubling us, or about our purpose in life and how much God loves us, which are really the same thing, because our chief purpose in life is to be loved by God and respond to it with gratitude by practicing unconditional love for God and others and for ourselves.

Certainly, on Friday night, when Mother Allison received ordination to the priesthood, this place was filled with abundant joy. Ordinations resemble weddings, except we take a lot more vows. They also act as a rebirth following years of preparation and gestation. On Friday night, we were invaded by joy not by an accomplishment but by a sheer gift of grace. It was a moment that touched us and moved us closer to God. Tears were shed, not least by yours truly. We applauded a worthy woman made worthy, as we all are, solely by the mercy of God. There was a vibration in the air, an energy that led us to spiritual ecstasy.

Of course, we can experience similar feelings at other special times, like Christmas and Easter, and weekly worship summons joy in our hearts, but these happen regularly, whereas

ordinations occur relatively rarely, and they awaken within us a keen sense of our own baptisms, the first and greatest ordination for ministry, whether we can remember that event or not. It lifts us up to aspire toward a more devout and sacrificial faithfulness, with a renewed determination to live the Gospel and share it.

Yet as wonderful as all of these joyous moments are, they cannot compare with the unimaginable, incomprehensible, indescribable joy of God when one sinner repents, when a single person makes that crucial choice to turn away from the path of destruction and turn around to follow the life and love of God fully revealed in Jesus Christ.

In this quest to find the lost sheep, God will go to any lengths, will even sacrifice His only Son on a cross, hoping that the lost sheep will hear its shepherd's call and home in on that voice until both are reunited. And God will never stop searching until the lost is found. He will take great risks, like leaving a flock of 99 alone, exposed and vulnerable to thieves and predators, while hunting down that little lamb who wandered off, confused, disoriented, separated, often stuck in a gulley unable to find a way out.

And once found, that sheep – so scared and helpless – gets lifted up and carried on the shoulders of its Savior until it's back where it belongs within the fold, and in celebration, the shepherd gathers friends and neighbors to rejoice, to share the joy of the discovery that saved the sheep from certain death. We are that precious to God, each and every one of us, both here and throughout the world, and we are precious not because of any qualities or capacities or value that distinguish us, but purely because God created us and sustains us in life, and above all, God loves us with fierce passion.

Of course, some of us don't see how this applies to us. We don't feel lost, can't accept the idea that we need to be found, and in our best moments, that's true, but it's a risky attitude,

awfully close to how the Pharisees and scribes felt when they criticized Jesus for welcoming sinners to dine with him. They thought that Jesus would be better off eating with them instead, lest he pollute himself consorting with such impure, undeserving people, but the scribes and Pharisees were lost more than anyone else, because they judged and condemned people they saw as lesser than, as inferior, and not least Jesus, who should have known better. To assume the role of the Pharisees and scribes exposes the poison of pride, the presumption of superiority, lethal to the soul.

All of us, from time to time, get distracted or attracted to what seems like greener grass, enticed by the shiny golden calf of idolatry, of placing something, anything, above God in our lives, and we often do it unaware. I don't think the lost sheep wandered off singing, "I'll do it my way." It just wasn't paying attention. It had lost focus on where it needed to be, on who it needed to be with, and that loss of focus led to isolation and being lost in the worst of all possible ways.

And then there are those who don't see how the parable applies to us, not because we feel safe and secure in our righteous, immune to temptation and error. Instead, we can hardly fathom that God would go out of His way to look for us. We feel unworthy, sinners that we are, laden with guilt and shame, beyond the pale of forgiveness, because of what we've done or not done. There's just a little bit of pride in that, to presume that our sinfulness is so powerful that it cannot be overcome by God's redeeming grace.

For those in despair, who feel irretrievably lost, allow me to share the comfort and wisdom of Paul Tillich, who puts it better than I ever could. "Grace strikes us," he wrote, "when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual,

because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.”

“Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: ‘You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!* If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience . . . nothing but *acceptance*.” [The Shaking of the Foundations, p. 161-162, author’s italics]

I know that’s easier said than done, but I cannot think of a stronger motive than the hope for a future in which we experience the joy of forgiveness, the liberation from the sin that holds us down so that we might be lifted up and carried on the shoulders of our Savior. And that hope for joy can be kindled when we listen closely for the voice of Jesus calling us each by name, a relentless voice that never gets hoarse.

Accept the acceptance of Jesus, who invites us to dine, sparking scandal and protest from the naysayers – both within and without – who say that we don’t belong there, that we’re not good enough. If Jesus will go after Paul, “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence,” he will come after us, too. If Jesus can convert Paul from a life of judgement, condemnation, and

hatred into a person who extolled the mercy of Christ, a man joyous despite his many hardships, then Jesus will search for us to the ends of the earth. If Paul, who described himself as the foremost of sinners, can receive forgiveness and repent, then so can we.

Joy awaits, yearning and eager, and what's most astonishing, almost beyond belief, is that we the lost and found can bring God joy. We normally think that works the other way around, of how God brings us joy, but the penitent sinner who accepts the mercy of Jesus, who shows up to share fellowship with him and to follow him – we bring God joy, and when we do, we experience the greatest joy of them all. Amen.