

“A Little Taste of Heaven”
Luke 15:1-10
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Longview Presbyterian Church
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“Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ 3 So he told them this parable: 4‘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? 5When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” 7Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. 8 ‘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? 9When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.” 10Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.’”

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

So I am the person who reads the first part of this passage and thinks, “Wow, those judgmental Pharisees and scribes are

real pieces of work. Can't they just let go of their impossibly high expectations and get in the spirit of rejoicing and celebrating Jesus is talking about here?"

But... it turns out I am ALSO the person who is ticked off in the airport security line to see how kind and friendly people in front of me are being to the woman who is late for her flight and is now cutting in front of all of us who were here 2 hours early like we were supposed to be.

And it turns out I am ALSO the person who receives an apology from Dexter towards the *beginning* of an argument we are having, only to hesitate in accepting that apology because I'm actually still enjoying my self-righteousness, thank you very much. So, it turns out *I am* a scribe, a Pharisee, grumbling to see new life and connection and grace in people who did not earn it. And listen, these religious leaders of the time, they get a bad rep, but they were working extremely hard, probably for most of their lives, to figure out what it meant to follow God. God had set before the people of Israel the path of life and had also pointed out the path of destruction, and these folks had been diligently reading and studying and working together to figure out what living in God's path of life really looked like. They had been working hard to get ready for God's coming to them.

But now this uncredentialed, upstart street preacher Jesus is sitting on hillsides surrounded by people like the tax collectors who are hanging on Jesus' every word. Tax collectors, as a reminder, worked for the folks who were oppressing the Jewish people, sometimes taking more money than they were supposed to for government purposes so they could skim a little off the top for themselves. And these tax collectors were likely bringing with

them all kinds of other unsavory people, Gentiles, who paid no mind to all the Temple laws and regulations that the scribes and Pharisees were working so hard to follow.

So, y'know, being a Pharisee myself apparently, I wonder if they might have accepted Jesus' scandalous ministry if he had at least been telling all these outcasts to get their act together, to repent, to start doing what hard-working religious folks had been doing to get ready for God's coming. But as far as they could tell, Jesus had not been doing any scolding of these unclean folks. Instead, to the horror of these religious leaders, Jesus had been doing quite the opposite - he had been *eating* with these people - sitting at the table with them, perhaps laughing with them at an inside joke, maybe getting into some discussions about the deeper matters of life, communing with them, sharing intimate space with them. Jesus appears to have no rules about cleaning up before you come to the table. Jesus is at rest simply *being* with these people no matter what condition they arrive in, just like those folks who happily let the latecomer cut them in line at the airport, just like that tenderhearted person who is quick to draw near in a conflict to repair the relationship.

And this is what I believe Jesus is trying to get across to hard-hearted folks like me in these two stories. These religious leaders had been working tirelessly *to get ready* for God's coming, when all the while, Jesus wants them to know that God *is ready* to be with them already. The scribes and Pharisees were bending over backwards to *prepare themselves for heaven*, and all the while, Jesus has been trying to show them in these scandalous meals that *heaven has actually come to them*. In the two parables we heard this morning, God is *not* a shepherd who

shrugs his shoulders when only 1% of his flock runs away. God is *not* a woman who figures that 9 out of 10 of her coins is good enough. Instead, God is the shepherd who exposes Himself to the rocky terrain of the wilderness and the predators that lurk there *until He finds* that one sheep who got away. God is the woman who refuses to wait until daylight to diligently search every inch of Her house *until She finds* that coin that somehow rolled under the table away from the eyesight of the average searcher. Jesus is not satisfied to simply talk about what heaven will be like someday, that time when all God has created will finally be brought back to Godself again. Instead, Jesus *enacts* that reality of heaven among those of us on earth, sharing a banquet table with folks who haven't cleaned their lives up yet. These meals Jesus has been having with folks who don't have their lives together - they are a little taste of heaven on earth. And the shepherd and woman in these two stories - they are a little taste of the God of heaven who impatiently crosses borders and boundaries to simply be with us.

From all of this, there are two words I want you to hear today. First: If you find yourself in the wilderness right now and you have convinced yourself that you are there because you haven't done the right things or that you need to clean up more before God will come and find you, let this be the moment you hear someone call that line of thinking what it is: an outright lie that can go straight back to the hell it came from. Let this be the moment that any picture of God disappointedly shaking God's head at you or crossing God's arms in disapproval gets replaced with the God who just showed up at your front door uninvited with a hot meal and all the time in the world. Let it be replaced with the

God who is close to tears as He searches the crevices and crags of the wilderness for you, the God who refills Her lamp with oil because the night has gotten darker and there's no way She is calling off the search for you. The God of heaven is here looking for you this morning and this God will not stop until you have been brought back into God's arms where you belong.

Second, a challenge: What would it look like for you to follow Jesus in seeking out the lost, in sharing space with folks in a way that makes others ask questions about what kind of God you are following? I could list of all kinds of examples here, ways that I have seen the people of this Church living this out day after day... but instead, I'm going to give you an opportunity right here this morning, to listen to how God is inviting you to participate in the search for the ones God loves.

In your What Disciples Do journal this week, you'll find an assignment that asks you to pray a particular prayer every day and then be open to whoever God might bring to your mind or across your path that day, so that you can join God in sharing intimate space with them, so that you can join God in entering the dark or forlorn places where they might feel lost and need someone to find them.

So if you would, close your eyes, and pray with me this prayer as a warm up for the rest of our week of joining God in the search. Before we say "Amen" I will leave a space of silence, a time for you to hear any names or suggestions God may bring to your mind. The reaching out may be scary and risky - but I wonder if it might also feel like joining together with friends and neighbors to have a party, because one who was lost has finally been found.

Close your eyes, and let us pray:

“God, show me today
the people who are lost
and might need a friend,
and give me the courage
to seek them out....

(silence)

Amen.

May you feel today God lifting you onto His own shoulders in celebration of finding you.

May you feel today God scooping you off the floor and calling together everyone She knows to throw a party in your honor.

And may you follow Jesus in enacting the kind of love that brings folks a little taste of the heaven Jesus so impatiently brought to us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.