“***A Broken Spirit***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, September 15, 2019

**Psalm 51:3, 6, 17**

3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. . . .

6 You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. . . . 

17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

**Luke 15:8–10**

8“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 neighbors, 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.”

The short parable from Luke occurs in the same chapter as another, more famous, parable, which I won’t identify yet. I want to see if you can name it, after I discuss *this* parable, and tell you that it has the same message as the more famous one. This parable has a woman very concerned when one of her precious coins is misplaced. You can imagine her lighting a lamp and getting down on all fours, looking under the table, in every nook and cranny and corner, and finally finding it! She is elated and calls a party to celebrate the recovery. Jesus says there is the same joy among the angels when one sinner repents. The message is that God and the angels want to find and rescue each wandering soul, that every soul is precious and has great value, like a silver coin, so to speak. Jesus draws out the value of the individual when he speaks of “*one* sinner who repents.” They care about the *one*, not just the sum total.

So, what other parable has a message about God delighting at the finding of a lost soul? It has the line “he was lost and has been found” (Luke 15:32). It’s the Prodigal Son parable, of course, although that one says a lot more about God’s personality. The Father in that parable is kindly, affectionate, and non-judgmental. The Father does not require any admission of sin or any apology from his irresponsible but repentant son. It is enough that he *wants* to return. Before his return, the son rehearses an apologetic speech (Luke 15:19), but when he returns and starts the speech (“I am no longer worthy to be called your son,” 15:21), the father won’t even let him finish! The father commands his servants to go get some rings and a robe, and to slaughter the fatted calf. Celebration is commanded! The parable of the coin doesn’t have any of this explicit detail about the Father. But since it focuses on how *treasured* every sinner is, and how happy God and the angels are when the sinner is “found,” one could *surmise* that God’s saving love is behind it all, but it doesn’t spell it out as the Prodigal Son does. The coin parable focuses on the *value* of what was lost, and on the *joy* when it is found.

The Prodigal Son story shows that God does not want an apology or a self-flagellating confession. Then what *does* God want? The psalm tells us God wants “a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart” (Ps 51:17). The returning son *does* have a broken heart; he yearns for his father. And what does the father want? The psalmist has the answer: “You desire truth in the inward being” (51:6). What an honest and pure heart this writer has! He admits his sin, and asks God for help: “Teach me wisdom in my secret heart” (51:6). Why is the heart “secret”? I think it’s really the same concept as the “inward being,” so it is a repeated stressing of *where* spiritual work occurs: in one’s “secret heart.” In the heart of hearts. In one’s deepest motivations.

It certainly is deeper than the mental place where opinions and preferences are kept. It is connected with our values, and with our emotions. A “broken spirit” is not just the conscious and thinking level of the mind; it is also the experience and the longing of what we call the “heart.” It is related to love. A broken heart is not loveless, but it may be love *starved*. It is needy. And God loves a needy and receptive heart. That’s the point of Jesus’ saying, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31–32). In other words, you have to *know* that you are sick, or are a sinner. *Those* are the kind of people whom Jesus can reach. It’s not that Jesus wouldn’t save other people. Rather, he is saying that you have to be honest enough to *admit* that you are needy, to get the help you need. Only if you *know* you need a physician, can the Great Physician get through to you. You have to release your ego, your pride, which can block God out.

If you open your broken or needy heart to God, then you are ready to be taught by God in your “secret heart.” And if you *have* this experience, there is joy in heaven over you. But it remains “secret,” that is, inward: between you and God and the angels. There are no trumpets blaring. But your angels are happy that God is touching your heart. Not only touching you, but *teaching* you wisdom. Does this wisdom have to do with hope or certainty, with comforting truths or with truths that convict and correct, with learning to understand others or with learning to make fewer social mistakes? Wisdom will probably be whatever of these things you need to learn, whatever has true meaning and value. So go to school—the secret school that is within you! God can reach you if you are needy, especially if you are broken hearted.

God treasures and cares for each one of us. We are not invisible; we are not forgotten. But we need to nurture our inward faith. We need to do the inner work. God understands that we need help. God is the heart seeker, the heart teacher, and the heart healer.