“***Rejoice with Me***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Sep. 14, 2025

**Jeremiah 23:3–4; 24:5–6**

3 Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. 4 I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall no longer fear or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord. . .

5 Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. 6 I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not pluck them up.

**Luke 15:1–7**

1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And 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? 5 And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my 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.”

There is a distantly common theme between the two passages inasmuch as God is promising to gather Judeans back from Chaldea, where they were exiled, while Jesus is speaking of how devoted a shepherd is, that he worries about each individual sheep, and sets out to rescue even one lost sheep. The message is not the same, but there’s a common thread of God caring about the lost or scattered. Let’s look at each one in its own setting.

Jeremiah was the prophet of Judah at the time that Judah lost its sovereignty, when it was re-conquered by Babylon in 586 B.C. Judah had rebelled against Babylon, and as punishment, the Babylonian king had Judah’s king killed, and its upper classes and priests exiled to Babylon. Jeremiah sees God promising to bring them back to Judah, to make them prosper, and to give them good shepherds, that is, good leaders. He has God say “I will plant them and not pluck them up” (24:6).

Jeremiah continued to live in Jerusalem during the exile, and elsewhere in his book he says he wrote letters and oracles and sent them to the exiles in Babylon. Evidently he is doing the same with this oracle. Often he rebukes the Jews and threatens them with punishment. But in this case, he seems to feel they’ve already been punished and what they need to hear about is the good will and intentions of God. As any good father would, God wants them to prosper and thrive, spiritually and physically.

Jesus’ message is about God’s overwhelming desire to save, and his care for the individual. The image of the shepherd leaving behind the 99 in order to go save the one, is a highly dramatic image meant to show how important the *one* is. Of course, each of the other 99, *as an individual*, is equally important. Each of us is unique and has a special insight or skill to bring to the family of God.

When the shepherd in the story finds the lost sheep, “he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices” (v. 6). Then he calls his friends over to rejoice with him, showing us that there is enormous rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents. Again, how important is the one sheep! In another speech, Jesus said “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. . . So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matt 10:29, 31).

The next story has a similar lesson. It is about a woman who had ten coins and she loses one. She gets down on her hands and knees with a lamp and searches diligently until she finds it, and she, too, is jubilant when she finds it, and calls over her neighbors to rejoice with her over the one coin. It sounds odd: calling a party to celebrate finding a coin! But it’s how Jesus stresses the point of how much *we* are valued. Each coin is highly valued, and God works hard to save each one. Notice that God is a woman in this parable.

Jeremiah had said “they shall no longer fear or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing” (23:4). Jesus has more of a focus on the individual believer. He says there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 who did not need to repent. Christians were told they were children of God, each one of them. This is different than being told that the *nation* is the child of God. It’s different spiritually, psychologically, and socially. Spiritually, what matters are persons—all the Ones!

We today are also learning to appreciate all the *ones*, all the individual persons whom we are to love, each lost sheep, each wandering son who’s ready to repent. God is ready to receive that one with a hug, a ring, and a robe! If you want to be in the kingdom, God throws the door wide open! If you want to do God’s will, Jesus calls you his mother, his brother, his sister (Mark 3:35). You are in Jesus’ family.

Your connection with God is a matter of your personal experience. It wasn’t determined beforehand, it is shaped each moment of your life, in *your* experience. It means that you matter more than the 99, although each of the 99 *also* matter more than the other 99. God cares about the individual person.

The philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev writes “each human soul is worth more than all the kingdoms of this world . . . Love means seeing the other in God and affirming him in eternal life” (*The Destiny of Man*, 107). Nations and families and churches don’t live forever, but *persons* do. Nations and families and churches were not made in the image of God (Gen 1:26), but *persons* were.

I rejoice at God’s and Jesus’ generous and open attitude. It doesn’t mean they close their eyes to sin or are indifferent to wrongdoing. It doesn’t mean you can do whatever you want, rip off whomever you want, and then come waltzing in. It just means that if you are honest, if you approach God with sincerity, you will find the door wide open. If you find some blockage there, it is probably the blockage of wrong teaching that has come down through the ages and is lingering in your mind, a teaching that puts all the focus on sin, tells you that you are depraved, and asks you to be ashamed. Many young adults say they don’t go to church because they are always made to feel ashamed. And where’s the joy in that? Jesus consistently speaks of rejoicing in connection with salvation. “It is the Father’s good pleasure to *give* you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32), he says. Be ready for this illuminating experience, this joyous realization!

A Christian named Mark Roberts says that he grew up in a Christian home and he never had one spectacular experience of being found by God. Rather, “what I do have are dozens of experiences of being found by God in different seasons of my life. . . when I wandered away from the Lord but he drew me back. . . moments of desperation in which God granted ‘the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding’ (Phil 4:7). . . I’m still walking with the Lord, not because I’m so good at finding God, but because God is so good at finding me” (depree.org/life-for-leaders/have-you-been-found/).

Joy! There is joy in the presence of God. Let yourself be found by God, and rejoice.