

## **“Making God Rejoice!”**

**Sunday, September 12, 2010: Luke 15:1-10**

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A Jewish story tells of the good fortunes of a hardworking farmer. The Lord appeared to this farmer and granted him three wishes, with the condition that whatever the Lord did for the farmer would be then given double to his neighbor. The farmer, scarcely believing his good fortune, wished for a hundred cattle. Immediately he received the hundred cattle and he was overjoyed until he saw that his neighbor had received two hundred cattle. So the farmer wished for a hundred acres of land, and again he was overjoyed to receive the hundred acres until he saw that his neighbor received two hundred acres of land. Rather than celebrating God’s goodness and abundance, the farmer could not escape feeling jealous and slighted because his neighbor had received more than he did. Finally, he stated his third wish: that God would strike him blind in one eye. And God wept.

In today’s Gospel story from Luke the Pharisees and scribes grumble about Jesus’ associating with people they considered sinful. These were people who for one reason or another did not, or could not keep the Law as the Pharisees interpreted it. Being orthodox followers of the Law, Pharisees were forbidden to have any contact with all sorts of people. They classified those people they considered sinful as the “*om ha’aretz*”, or the people of the land. In our day, these would be the people the late heiress and hotel magnate Leona Helmsley called the, “little people.” You remember her response when she was brought up on tax evasion charges? “We don’t pay taxes,” she stated. “Only the little people pay taxes.” Leona would have made a fine Pharisee. This picayune and elitist interpretation of the Law leads to the Pharisees indignant response when they observe Jesus hanging out having a barbeque with a bunch of these people of the land.

The Pharisee’s did not believe in redemption and restoration of people who they saw as sinners. Once classified as a sinner, an outsider, an alien, you became like Hester Prynne; you were marked for life. If anything the Pharisees saw the people of the land through the lens of malice and they did so with a certain sadistic pleasure. They looked forward to the condemnation of the sinner, not their saving. So seeing Jesus hang out with the little people does not go over well.

Hearing the Pharisees’ disdain for what he is doing, Jesus tells them two parables; one of the lost sheep and the second of the lost coin. If you recall, three years ago I tossed ten coins onto the sanctuary floor and I swept them up with a broom to illustrate my sermon. This year I was planning to use sheep, but I had difficulty finding one hundred of them, or anyone willing to do the sweeping up afterward!

In these two short parables Jesus conveys a radically different God than the one the Pharisees understood. Jesus conveys a God’s whose passion to go to the ends of the earth to find each lost child of his is relentless. God will do everything, Jesus says, to redeem every last one of us, regardless of the condition of our life.

When a lost soul or a disenfranchised person is found and brought back into the fold of human society, God is as glad, Jesus says, as a shepherd is when a lost sheep is brought home and restored to the flock. God and all the angels in heaven leap with joy, Jesus says, when a person expelled from human society is found and comes home, just like the woman who, having lost a valuable coin rejoices upon finding it.

But the Pharisees don’t see this merciful, forgiving, loving God that Jesus proclaims. Or at least they don’t want to see this authentic God. Like the farmer in the Jewish tale, they won’t see their own abundant blessings. Rather they focus on the resentment that wells up in them when they see those they believe as undeserving being treated with dignity and compassion. Their begrudging spirit prevents them from embracing God’s mercy and God’s love for all God’s children.

And so it is with us as well.

Nine years ago yesterday we re-called the terrorist attacks on our nation on September 11, 2001. On that day the towers of the World Trade Center were filled with thousands of people who represented all sorts and condition of humanity; Asians, African-

Americans, and Caucasians; affluent people, corporate big-wigs, middle management, secretaries, restaurant employees and building maintenance workers; poor, middle-class, well-off and rich; Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindu's, Christians of all flavors, agnostics and atheists; native born Americans, immigrants, naturalized citizens and illegal aliens; married people, single people, people with partners, people with families, gays and straights.

Had we spoken with any number of these people before 9/11's tragedy they all pretty much would have expressed to varying degrees certain prejudices they held about people who were different from them. All humans hold these beliefs, even those of us who work hard at understanding our prejudices and seeking God's healing of them. Among those thousands of people that day there would have been no shortage of beliefs about how they and their particular brand of being a human being made them more deserving of God's love, or in secular lingo, made them more deserving of special benefits or privileges of one kind or another over and above people who differed from them.

Like the Pharisees and the farmer in the story, they would have been resentful if someone they perceived as being a lesser person than them, ever received more of something than they did, for whatever reason that might be. I say this not to make the people in the Twin Towers on 9/11 guilty of any worse behavior than the rest of humanity. They were guilty of these resentments toward others precisely because they were human. Just like me. Just like you.

But on that horrific day all that changed. Once the planes collided into the Towers and the people in them realized that their lives were imperiled, they forgot their differences, their prejudices and their resentments. Instead their common humanity overrode these things. We have heard the stories of extraordinary acts of kindness and compassion by people in the Towers, as well as of the police, firemen, EMT's and clergy who rushed into those burning buildings to do whatever they could to alleviate human suffering and fear.

No one that day looked at someone else and said, "Hey, he's a Muslim, she's Black, he's gay, she's an illegal alien and then ignore them as unworthy of assistance and compassion because of who they were. No one did a litmus test to deduce who was worthy or acceptable to be cared for and saved. And no one looked at someone different from them and said that their predicament of being in those burning and collapsing buildings was rightful suffering – God's justice - the consequence for being whom they were. No one did that. In that moment of unimaginable horror and fear people reverted to being the human beings God created; all of them were nothing more or nothing less than children of the same compassionate and loving God. And in that moment God's love and compassion radiated through them.

Why does it take tragedy, an *in extremis* situation to get us to that point of being the people God made and calls us to be?

I think all of the people who were in or who rushed into the Twin Towers nine years ago were lost sheep and coins that were found in that crisis moment. They were people who forgot their resentments, their prejudices, their hatreds and their fear of the other. In showing mercy and compassion to all, even in the midst of the holocaust of fear and death that surrounded them, these people found their essential humanity and were restored to right relationship with one another and with God. And even in that horrific moment God and the heavenly host rejoiced because of that.

But God also wept when people whose minds twisted by bad theology, hated others enough to fly planes into buildings and murder them. On that day sheep and coins were found, but sheep and coins were also lost. And God wept.

My sisters and brothers, may we who live in the midst of a culture of hateful people, people who want to engage in Qur'an burning, a culture that defaults to Islamophobia to justify its irrational fears, a culture of insidious racial-hatred, persistent anti-Semitism, gay-baiting, increasing economic disparity and despair and howling political invective, come to learn from the example of those who died on 9/11. Holding fast to their witness may we become found sheep or coins and find the life that God desires for us and for all of Creation. Surely God will leap for joy when we do.

Amen.