

**Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time/September 15, 2013**

**I Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10;**

**Rev. Joel M. Krueger**

*"The Joy of Finding What is Lost"*

Jesus, it seems was constantly surrounded by multitudes. The author of Luke especially seems to want to make that point. In Luke, there are crowds around Jesus all the time. And it is interesting, in today's passage, we get a glimpse of what perhaps some of those crowds looked like.

We hear that tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus. And why not, they would have been just as interested as anyone else, in hearing the teachings, the stories, the parables that sometimes sounded almost like jokes, that this by-now-famous traveling teacher was sharing.

Of course we know that wherever Jesus went, those who were sick and in need of healing, those who were experiencing possession by some form of evil, either came themselves or were brought by others.

Of course, there were the disciples and other followers of the master, their "Lord", their teacher. And of course it wasn't just the "12", the "chosen apostles." Luke especially reminds us of the "women" who traveled with Jesus, mostly unnamed, but who certainly played a very important role in his ministry, many of whom may have contributed to the funding of the work, the ministry, the movement.

And then too, as we hear in today's passage, there were others like the Pharisees and the scribes, religious leaders, who prided themselves on their righteous ways of living, but who were also interested in hearing what Jesus was teaching. Was he keeping within the religious framework of his Jewish faith and traditions? Was he spreading some false, dangerous cult that would lead the people astray? They wanted to keep an eye on him. But they were also interested in learning from him too.

This, was the community that gathered around Jesus in those days. This was his "church", if you will, though the "church" would really not come into being until after his death and resurrection. But this is what he had. It was a mixed and complex group, ever changing with each town he entered. If you think the followers of Jesus were all of one mind and heart, where everyone loved each other and always agreed and got along, well just get that image out of your head. It could not have been anything further from that!

And so, within that diverse population of people, all who were gathered to hear the teacher speak, we hear that a few, some Pharisees and scribes, were "grumbling" a bit, complaining apparently that Jesus was welcoming "sinners", those who were not careful to abide by the strict rules and regulations of Jewish religious law, who may not have even cared about following that law, who were deemed by the authorities as "unclean", the kind that respectable people did not associate with. And he was not only welcoming them, but eating with them! Of course, in the minds of the Pharisees and scribes, that meant he was associating himself with them, he saw himself as one of them, and if they were sinners, then so must he be one as well!

Jesus, hearing them, responds with a parable. *"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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 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."*

And then he tells another about a woman who loses one of her ten coins, who turns on all the lights, and sweeps and searches the whole house until she finds it! And when she finally finds it, she, just like the shepherd, calls together her friends and neighbors, saying *"Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost!"* And Jesus tells them again, to make sure they get the point, *"Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

Oh, there is so much good stuff here! First, Jesus is trying to teach them, that this kingdom of God that he's been talking about, is open to everyone, righteous and sinners alike. But it is more than that, so much more! He tells these stories about things that are lost.

We can imagine the sheep that gets separated from the flock, out there grazing on its own, unmindful of its being alone. Until darkness begins to fall and it looks up and realizes everybody else has gone and it doesn't know the way home! It's scared. It seeks the safety of a low hanging bush or a rocky outcrop in which it can hide and it hunkers down, shaking with fear. But the shepherd, counting his flock as he does every evening as he gathers them for the night, realizes that one is missing and sets out to find it. He goes to the places they were feeding, he looks high and low, literally, high and low, for he knows that when sheep are afraid they can get themselves into the strangest places, seeking safety. And calling out to the sheep, he seeks to ease its fears and encourage it to come out to him. Until eventually he finds it, picks it up and carries it home, rejoicing.

Have you ever been lost? I remember as a child, maybe 4 or 5 years old, getting separated from my mom and sister in a department store. I wasn't lost, but I felt like it, when I couldn't find them! And it was probably less than a minute, but when they came and found me, I was so relieved, so happy and thankful, I clung to my mother. And I am sure that she probably just laughed a bit at my reaction and said something to reassure me. But I was safe then. I was found.

There are many people in our world who know what it truly means to be lost. Those lost to addiction; those lost in lives of isolation, feeling separated from anyone who might love them; those lost in places of violence and destruction like the millions in Syria and those refugees seeking safety; those lost in loneliness and depression; the young who experience a sense of being lost when they are bullied and tormented by those around them.

Our world is full people who feel lost. And it seems to me, that if there were no other reason, no other purpose or mission for the church to exist, it would exist if only to find the lost and return them home. We need to be about finding the lost and bringing them home.

For that's what the call of God is all about. It's about going out to find the lost. And that's where the joy is. It seems that it is in the action of finding the lost, more than our trying to be good or nice or in being righteous like those Pharisees tried so hard to be, it is in reaching out and searching for the one that is lost, that something special happens. A dynamic within the essence of God occurs, an energy, a force within the universe, something happens, when one who has been lost, is suddenly found, is somehow brought out of the darkness of whatever sin or horrible place they have been lost in. We might say that's when God smiles. That there is rejoicing in heaven when the lost are found.

But it is not a private joy. It's not a joy shared just between the one who is found and God. No, Jesus goes out of his way, in both parables to say that the real joy is found when the lost is brought home, brought back into the community of friends and neighbors. *"Rejoice with me for I have found my sheep that was lost!", "Rejoice with me, for I have found my coin that was lost!"*

And you know he was looking right at all of those gathered around him there, the disciples, the women, the sick and the poor, the crazies and the sane, the tax collectors and sinners and even, and maybe especially the Pharisees and scribes. All of them. It would only be when all of them, together could celebrate, could be engaged in the seeking and the finding, in the being lost and the being found, that the real celebration and rejoicing would take place.

We are called to seek the lost. To go out searching with the shepherd. To sweep and light the lamp and search with the old woman. For it is in the searching that we will know the joy. It is in the searching, that we will be found. Amen.