

Joy in Heaven

Luke 15:1-10

This sermon marks the beginning of a new teaching series: *Why Should I Follow Jesus?* Through this, I will share at some of the reasons for my faith and why I choose, on my life journey, to follow Jesus. Today represents reason number one: there is joy in heaven. Joy characterizes the quality of life we'd call heavenly. This does not mean that you have to wait until you die to experience heavenly joy.

We have lived almost 19 centuries since the gospels were written. There has been lots of history between then and now. Some four centuries after Jesus' life, there was a significant shift in Christian perspective from salvation as present a reality of life to salvation as a future reward. That shift had a lot to do with Christianity becoming the state church of the Roman Empire. It was very difficult for a church that saw itself as counter-cultural—pretty much opposed to the abuses of entrenched power—functioning as the official religion of the Empire. So the shift happened toward an emphasis on individual salvation rather than communal salvation. The timing of that salvation also shifted from here and now to after death in heaven.

When Jesus in the gospels talked about heaven, it was for the purpose of focusing on this life. Heaven served to clarify how the nature and values of God need to affect how we live, how we treat each other, and what we choose to value. Comparing God, Ultimate Reality, to a shepherd and a woman, Jesus revealed how he thought the universe itself was put together.

We will try to learn from two stories told by Jesus how he understood God and how that affects us. The two stories feature a man losing a sheep and going to find it, and a woman who lost some money and searched for it until she found it. They describe the nature of God and how God feels about us. The one characteristic describing attitude of God toward us is joy: joy in heaven, in the heart of God, when someone who was lost is found, when someone who wanders away comes back, when someone on the outside comes inside, and when someone who is asleep wakes up.

What prompted Jesus to tell these stories was a matter of attitude. Jesus was teaching and a group described as sinners and tax collectors were crowding around listening. A group of Pharisees and scribes were grumbling about such undesirables being next to Jesus. They began criticizing Jesus' habit of associating with those sinners. There was a sharp cultural division between Pharisees and those others (called People of the Land). Pharisaic regulations, in fact, included instructions to lend them no money. Don't trust them with any secrets or appoint them guardian to orphan. "To marry a daughter to any of them was like exposing her, bound and helpless, to a lion." (Wm. Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*)

In response, Jesus told them two parables, two short stories. He looked at the crowd and said to them, "If you were a shepherd with 100 sheep and lost one, you'd go after it! Everyone knew that the shepherd was personally responsible for the well being of the sheep and would retrieve it even at the cost of his own life. Flocks often belonged to an entire village and represented their livelihood. Other shepherds would care for the 99, but you would go search for lost sheep. Sometimes it would end up taking many hours, all night, or even several days. And when it was found, there would be shouts of joy, a huge feeling of relief, and a tremendous celebration.

Jesus' point was that's how God is. That's how God feels. No one is expendable. Some people will just write off other people as not worth their time and effort. Some of us might just give up on

another person thinking, "They'll never get it," but God is not that way. You are vitally important in God's universe. That other person you know is also vitally important in God.

If you were a woman who lost one of ten silver coins, you'll scramble to find it. Your house would have been dark, with maybe one small window for light. The packed-earth floor would have been covered with straw. It would have been easy to lose a small coin and hard to find like—like a needle in a haystack. But it would have been important to find it. One such coin represented a day's wage for a working man. There was a financial reality and it might have represented an emergency situation—life or death in a hand-to-mouth existence.

There may have been another urgent reason for the woman's frantic search. In Palestine, the mark of a married woman was a headdress of ten silver coins. She likely would have saved these coins painstakingly over the years. To lose one would have been like losing a jewel on your wedding ring. There would have been great urgency in searching and a great joy in finding.

What did the shepherd and the woman each do upon finding what had been lost? They threw a party! They celebrated with their neighbors! They rejoiced! This is how God is. This is the underlying truth of creation. This is how God feels about you and me—not judgmental, not removed, and not like the Pharisee's understanding of God. Joy is the human emotion that reflects God's response to us: joy when we show up, joy when we tune in, when we wake up, and when we start to live.

Jesus' stories told us that joy is a characteristic of God. The story we usually call The Prodigal Son follows immediately after these two in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel and the Father in that story also rejoices in his son's return. He has a great big party! That's how God is. The stories are not saying that we're supposed to feel joyful all the time. Ironically, that may just lead to guilt and feeling inadequate because we're not joyful enough. Joy is just a feeling that seems to come sometimes, often when you're not expecting it and just sometimes for many of us.

In thinking about all this, I came to a realization that I'm often not filled with joy. That doesn't mean I'm not a happy person. I am filled with gratitude for life's many blessings and often have a feeling of deep satisfaction. Certainly the last thing I want is for those close to me to feel badly for me or feel guilty that I am not often joyful. That inner conversation this week prompted this poem. Its title is *What's missing?*

Joy
Is that what's missing
When you stop
And think about it?
You can be grateful
In touch with how blessed you are
Family
Friends
Meaningful work
Opportunities to learn and grow
But joy can be
More elusive
You can squeeze meaning
Out of each experience
But joy requires
Much less work
In fact, it requires

No work at all
And maybe that's
what's missing.
(Jack Price ©2010)

The good news is that God is joyful, that the universe bends toward joy. And the source of God's joy is us when we wake up to God's love, when we live life from perspective of God's values, and when we start to embrace God's dream for life.

Joy is available to us, just to be clear. We can feel God's joy when we touch God's presence, but even that touching is not a task to be accomplished or even something we have to try to do. It's more like a realization that just comes sometimes. This story was told by the President of Boston Conservatory. As graduate piano student, he had to accompany some undergrad voice lessons. He resented it, but it was a requirement of his scholarship. He just couldn't get out of it. What a waste of time! It just didn't match what he felt he needed in his music education. Well, it turned out that one of those undergrad singers was a young Kathleen Battle who became a famous opera singer. That President said he came to realize that he was so tied to his vision of what he needed to experience that he was not open to what he was actually experiencing.

There is a learning here for us as well. The experience of God is available for each of us, but only when we are open to it, not seeking to control it. We experience God on God's terms and not ours. God is available to us only in the present time and present space--not through analysis, study, or even reflection, but by being present to ourselves and present to each other. We can experience God's presence by listening to and hearing each other's stories, by sharing our own stories honestly, and therefore by being present to the God who lives deep within us--who speaks with a still, small voice.

We had a workshop yesterday here at Crossroads Church for a new work group – the Crossroads Core Values Team. This group is not about that list of core values developed in the early days of Crossroads, but about what is core to being followers of Jesus. The focus was on being present to God's presence, discerning our own identity, and discovering our individual and communal calling.

The main way this happens is in deepening our relationships with each other. Those who came yesterday made commitments to have 1 on 1 conversations with each other; to listen, share honestly and deeply—to be present with each other and thus be present to God, and to be open to what emerges as a result. I invite each of you to commit to have one such conversation in the month of September and then to come to the second work group workshop on Saturday morning, October 9, where you can learn more and practice this type of intimate conversation.

God calls each of us to think outside the box of our lives and trust that each life (including your life) is precious in God's sight. God calls us to live in the reality that all life is absolutely precious to God. The joy we feel--especially on those occasions when we fear we've lost something precious to us, then we find it; or when we feel lost ourselves and suddenly discover that we are home--that joy reflects the joy of God's own heart. It is a joy directed toward you. Thanks be to God.