

"Joy in Heaven"
Luke 15:1-10

September 15, 2019

14th Sunday After Pentecost

Do you ever think about what makes God happy? We know what makes us happy and we spend a lot of time thinking and talking about that. But what causes great joy in heaven for God? Perhaps you've never thought of that question before. But if you knew the answer to that question, would you want to do things that make God happy? Of course we would, wouldn't we? Our text for today tells us exactly what causes great joy in heaven. However, the irony in the text is that those people who thought they were doing the most to make God happy were actually the ones who are most upset with what makes God happy and dislike the very thing that causes great joy in heaven. That may be the case for us today, as well

What IS that source of joy for God? Well, we know some things that do not make God happy. For example, since God has created and owns everything, there is nothing He could find in creation that could make Him happy. In the same way, since God is holy and requires nothing less than holiness from his creatures, there is nothing that we sinful people could do, in terms of good works, to make God happy.

So, we reason that it must be some sort of religious thing that makes God happy. Some people act as if they are doing God a favor by coming to Divine Service on Sunday. Whether they pay attention to the service or not, they think they have made God happy merely by showing up, throwing a buck or two in the offering plate, and have shown some love for "the Big Guy upstairs." Needless to say, there is no record in the Holy Scriptures that any of this makes God happy. One could probably argue that such behavior makes God sad or angry.

What about faithfully following Jesus Christ? Does that make God happy? Is God happy because of those who faithfully attend worship every Sunday and every special service during Advent, Christmas and Lent to hear the the Word of God; those who regularly stay after worship or come on other days of the week to participate in the study of the Word of God; those who volunteer to teach Sunday School or Midweek School; those who agree to serve as congregational officers or on committees without ever having the hope of being voted off; and so on? Aren't we, the faithful, the ones who make God happy? I'm sure God is pleased with such faithful worship and sincere service. However, does it make Him happy? The Bible doesn't say.

What actually makes God happy? God is happy when He has all people in relationship with Him. The Bible speaks of a God "who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:4) Therefore, His love extends to all people. The Word of God says, "God so loved the world – that is every single person – so that He gave His only Son." And, in sending His own Son, Jesus Christ, God was bringing salvation to all the world. St. Paul writes, "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." (2 Corinthians 5:19)

Despite the inclusivity of God's desire, God's love, and God's salvation, sin separates us from Him and divides us from one another. Knowing this, we enjoy playing a game in which we divide people into groups – those who are in and those who are out. In our text the division was between the "bad guys" – the traitorous dishonest tax collectors and the shameful public outcasts (like prostitutes), on the one hand – and the "good guys" – the Pharisees and the scribes, the pious and religious leaders of the Jews, on the other hand.

In our day and age, we like to divide people up into groups, as well – the "bad guys" – unbelievers, unfaithful, and unchurched evildoers of this world – and the "good guys" –

believing, faithful, church members like us. We may gossip about the “bad guys” and how terrible they are. Likewise, we may feel smug and brag about how faithful we are.

God’s desire, love, and salvation know no such divisions. God calls all people into His Kingdom. He calls those who assume they are “in” like the Pharisees who were the religious leaders of the day and the scribes who were the religious teachers of the day. God also calls those who assume they are “out” due to their immoral lifestyle, their weak or nonexistent faith, and their rejection by the religious people of the day.

To explain this situation, Jesus tells two very familiar stories: the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin. In these parables, Jesus makes some very interesting and surprising points about who “the lost” are; who “the found” are; how “the found” are found; and what it means to be found. These points will answer the ultimate question: what makes God happy

The first thing to notice about the story is that there are no differences between those who are lost and those who remain found. In other words, the shepherd in the first parable who leaves ninety-nine sheep does not go searching for a goat. The ninety-nine in the pen are sheep and the one who has strayed away is a sheep. Similarly, the woman in the second parable who has ten coins called drachmas and loses one does not go searching for a silver dollar. The nine coins she has are drachmas. The one coin that is lost is a drachma, too.

The second thing to notice is that the lost item, both the sheep and the coin, do not go looking for their owners or are even aware that such a search for them is even going on. The sheep and the coin are both purely passive. It is the shepherd who finds the sheep and the woman who finds the coin and not the other way around.

The third thing to notice is that the sheep and the coin are not merely saved. They are both restored to the community by the shepherd and the woman. This is hard work. The shepherd has to travel a great distance to find the sheep and, when he finds the sheep, he puts them on the shoulders and makes the long hard journey back again. The woman looks hard and long for the coin to the point of even sweeping out the dirt floor in her house until she finds the coin. The finding and restoration to the community always involves a celebration. Eating together in a huge feast is not simply the opportunity to satisfy hunger and provide nutrition. Eating together was a sign of acceptance, inclusion, and restoration.

Why did Jesus tell these parables? These stories are not about foreign missions in far away lands with people unlike us. They are stories of life here at home with people more like us than not. The Pharisees and the scribes had done something which God Himself had not done: they had divided the people of God into two groups – the good and the bad, the insiders and the outsiders, and the worthy and unworthy. The tax collectors and “sinners” (a term to describe those who are socially unacceptable) – those unworthy, bad, outsiders were all drawing near to hear Jesus. This should have caused great rejoicing. However, the Pharisees and the scribes, were busy grumbling about the attention Jesus was giving them. He was receiving them, preaching to them, and eating with them (that sign of forgiveness, acceptance, and restoration). They felt that Jesus should chastise them, reject them, and surely never eat with them. One commentator remarked that the Pharisees and scribes were more concerned that attention be given to the neglected ninety-nine and the disregarded drachmas.

Do we do the same? Do we view those who do not show up for worship regularly, are not involved in the study of the Word of God, or are not acting very spiritual as less important than we are? Do we grumble about those who do not give or serve, but always take and

demand service as being inferior to us? There are cries, at times, that the church should serve the faithful since the faithful pray, pay, and serve. And so we make those divisions.

The Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, not only THAT Jesus accepted and restored such people, but how easily and quickly He did so. They probably felt that, if tax collectors and sinners wished to come back, they should change and improve themselves first. If they really wanted to come back, they knew where the Temple was. But Jesus sought them out. Like sheep and coins, these people did not find Jesus. Jesus found them.

Do we grumble that God is too merciful and too easily accepts people back? I've heard that from people outside the Lutheran Church who say, "You Lutherans just make everything too easy." Should such people have to sweat a bit before being restored? Should there be a time of probation before people are allowed back into the Church? Should people be forced to change and become more acceptable before we accept them back?

We would like to be better than the Pharisees and scribes and accept people back in the church without hesitation, without a time of probation, no matter what they've done. God's mercy is for everyone. We say that, but would we do that?

I remember a day back in 1992 when I was serving as a pastor in Wisconsin. A man stood before a hushed audience to give a speech which was televised on all the channels. He chose to speak words from our epistle reading for today, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life." (1 Timothy 1:15-16)"

I asked my congregation the next day in Bible class whether they thought this verse promised God's mercy to everyone. They all answered, "Yes." Then I asked them about the man who said these words on television the day before and whether these words applied to him. They all loudly said no. The reason? The man was Jeffrey Dahmer and the words were spoken at his sentencing trial for the murder and dismemberment of seventeen boys and young men.

I don't pretend to understand the mind or spiritual state of Jeffrey Dahmer, but the incident shows me that we believe some people are outside the grace of God and can never be found, whether they be tax collectors, prostitutes, or mass murderers. We think there is a limit to the grace of God and, for the Pharisees and the scribes, Jesus had surpassed that limit.

But God has an "amazing grace" of which we sang in our first hymn. Jesus came into this world to seek and to save the lost. This wasn't just for good, moral, churchgoing members. This was for the Gentiles, the really bad people, and the societal outcasts. The lost includes everyone. And, thanks be to God, it includes you and me.

Jesus left His throne on high, took on the role of the servant, and suffered and died for every single sin of every single person. He did not come to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. He gave his life for the good people and the bad people, the socially acceptable and the social outcast, and faithful church members and the "NONES" (those who can be no church affiliation).

His mission was then and now is: to declare God's love to all people, give out God's forgiveness by virtue of His death on the cross, to restore them as the people of God. This always involves celebrating and eating together. Here, we gather around a feast in the table of our Lord and He dines with us. He provides His body and His blood, crucified and risen for

us. We celebrate the forgiveness of sins that is ours and we celebrate the new life for all eternity which shall be ours.

So what really makes God happy? What really causes joy in heaven? It's not the good deeds that we do. It's not the religious things that we do. It is when one sinner repents, that is found and brought back by Jesus and the preaching of His Word. It doesn't matter who that person is. It doesn't matter what that person has done. In fact, it says God is more happy with that "than ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Jesus was giving a bit of a sarcastic jab at the Pharisees and scribes who had rejected John the Baptist call for repentance. There are none, from the worst sinners ever to the most faithful church member, who need no repentance.

How can we share in God's joy? First of all, let's drop the divisions regarding who is in need of the ministry of the Word of God and who is not. In the sight of God there are no church/unchurched; believers/nonbelievers or good/bad. There are only sinners in need of God's mercy and forgiveness. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and you are in need of His mercy, regardless of whether you are a religious leader or a prostitute. The condemnation applies to all and the mercy is designed for all.

Remember that the mercy of God is free and unconditional. It is not earned nor deserved. It doesn't belong to the church or to the clergy or to the good church members. Jesus lived for all. Jesus died for all to give forgiveness to all. Jesus rose from the dead for all to give eternal life to all. People may be ignorant of this mercy. People may reject this mercy. But Jesus never rejects anyone, nor should we. We continue to declare the mercy of God to all people, whether they are morally good or bad, institutionally church-ed or not church-ed, or apparently saved or likely unsaved.

Instead of spending our time pointing out those who we feel are in need of repentance or those we think are beyond repentance, let us each live a life of repentance. This is what Martin Luther said when evaluating the penitential system of the Roman Church which said that repentance was an occasional activity only for those felt their sin. He said that repentance is not an activity, not an option, or something not always needed. Whether unbelievers or faithful Christians, God calls us all to repent always.

When repentance is given by God (and in the parables, "being found" is equated with repentance) to anyone, whether to someone who never was a part of the church or to someone who was a faithful church member, do not be grumble, doubt, or even reject such repentance. Instead, repentance, forgiveness, and restoration always involve celebration. Accept people into the community of God with the mercy and love which God provides.

There are many images of God that stick in our mind, some of which are biblical and some are not – an old gray-haired grandfather who pats us on the back for encouragement, a strong and mighty deity who controls the wind and the waves, the lightening and thunder, and goes about smiting people, and others. The image of God is a happy party animal is probably not one stuck in your brain. But we see from our Gospel reading for today that this is the true nature of God: to rejoice and celebrate. The cause is not our shallow religious actions, our pious and sincere service to Him, or even our reaching the lost for Christ in faraway places. The Lord rejoices over a seemingly small thing. There is joy in heaven over something that we might overlook. When just one person, big or small, important or unnoticed, good or bad, repents, that is, is found by our Lord and restored to His community, God is happy and heaven rejoices. May that make us joyful, too. Amen