

Rejoice With Me

1 Timothy 1: 12-17

Luke 15: 1-10

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1 Timothy 1: 12-17

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Luke 15: 1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this 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. “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Have you ever been lost, have you ever looked around and have no idea just where you are, and even though you may be in a crowd, you are absolutely alone? There is indecision—do I stay and try to make sense of this and hope that someone comes to find me—but what if it takes a long time so I better find my own way back—but what if I get even more lost?

On a dreary day my Mom took me shopping for school clothes as I was getting ready to start kindergarten. The windows in the city department store were filled with so many bright and wonderful things that I wanted to keep on stopping to ooh and ahh over, to look closely at all those treasures behind the glass. My Mom was on a mission though and this was not a day for window shopping and dawdling. We went back and forth a bit as I would suddenly stop to look around and she pull just a bit tighter on my hand so I would move along with her. Then I would stop again, and she would move us along. After a few times of this, she let go of my hand and walked away just the tiniest bit where she could see me but I could not see her.

When I realized that she was gone and I was alone, my sense of shopping fun and adventure became instant tears and panic. Looking around everyone looked the same—tall

grown ups wearing long raincoats and carrying big black umbrellas. The crowd towered over me and I was all alone. I froze---too afraid to move and do anything other than cry and call out for my Mom. Hours later---at least to me---yet instantly to her, my Mom 'found' me.

As the lost one I could do nothing to not be lost. I had to be found. I needed my mother to seek me out through the deep forest of long raincoats and umbrellas. My Mom was the one to seek me, and to find me.

The sense of such deep fear and overwhelming panic comes back with the long ago memory, but what also comes flooding back is the joy, the relief, at being found. To be lost, to feel absolutely alone, to need to be sought out and found is not just a child's experience but can happen to us at any age when we wander away from the home and heart we have known, when we become displaced and overlooked in our society, when we know we are lost by our poor life decisions that focus only on our own wishes and ways, and when we believe that we are good and righteous yet are judgmental and are holding others in our contempt.

The tax collectors--those who were law breakers greedily profiting off of fellow citizens as they collaborated with the Roman Empire, and the sinners--those who know they willingly persist in following a path of seeking out only their own personal best interest come what may, find themselves drawn to Jesus, this healer and teacher, who by his presence and grace seeks these who are lost from living as fully, sincerely, genuinely, as they were created to be. He finds these lost ones not as the grumbling contemptuous leaders of false righteousness do --the Pharisees and scribes--but by relationship and connection, and in modeling a better way of life. They are drawn, attracted, and as hearts and minds are changed, there is joy in heaven over the changed tax collector, the repentant sinner. There is joy in the presence of the angels of God.

Scripture does not tell us what happened for the tax collectors, the sinners, the scribes and the Pharisees from this one particular moment in Luke's gospel. We do not know if there was long lasting repentance from them and rejoicing for them, for even some of them, but we can look decades ahead to Saul the blasphemer, persecutor, and man of violence who poured out his grateful heart and strengthened soul to Timothy. Paul was lost in the worse way a person can be lost in his life as he tormented and tortured Christians, yet God sought him out, found him, and with overflowing mercy, faith, patience and love, this bearer of death became a bearer of Christian life, an example to those who would come to believe in Jesus Christ for eternal life.

God seeks out all who are lost, as the lost cannot find their own way--our own way-- out. God seeks, finds and rejoices.

God is the risk-taking shepherd who crawls through scraggly brush and rocky crevices where an individual lost sheep who has wandered away might hide, and where it is vulnerable to predators and many other dangers. Even if it appears that there is little hope in finding the lost sheep, the shepherd persists until he can lay it on his shoulders and carry it safely home, rejoicing all the way at their reunion.

God is the woman lighting her lamp and sweeping her home carefully and with absolute commitment to finding it, looks for a missing coin, a great treasure, that has been misplaced, displaced. God looks where it may have fallen through the cracks and been forgotten, just as God looks where any of God's beloved children may have fallen through the cracks, may have been forgotten or displaced. Every coin mattered to the woman looking around her home. Every person matters to God as God welcomes us all, rejoicing when all are found as this is the reward of God's labor.

We may be lost in ways as large as Saul/Paul, or John Newton who poured out his joy at being found by God's amazing grace. We may be lost as the Pharisees and scribes who self-

righteously hold others in contempt, or we may be as the tax collectors and sinners who consistently put ourselves and our own interests first. We may be as the wandering sheep lured away. We may be as a people lost and displaced, not remembering what great treasure we are to God. When we are lost, God seeks, finds and rejoices.

Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor speaks to the many ways we can be lost and then found by a rejoicing God, “Lostness shows us who we really are, and who God really is.” We learn that God continually searches for us, and that is amazing grace! Amen.