

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Rejoice With Me”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Ordinary 24—September 15, 2019

Lessons: 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Last Sunday, Psalm 139 was one of our readings and Bob Grubbs read it from the King James Version and it sounded wonderful. Bob commented that the verses that were chosen by the folks who choose the lectionary omitted what he considers to be the very best verses in that Psalm and frankly some of the best verses in all of Scripture. So this week I want to share those with you, again from the King James Version:

O lord, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it.

Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee.

There is no place we can go that is outside of God’s reach. That same proclamation is found in our lessons today. Paul was a blasphemer, a persecutor, a man of violence, the foremost of sinners, and that did not stop God from reaching out to him and showing him a new way of life. No matter how unworthy you may feel or even be, God can still use you to make the world a better place. If God can show mercy to the likes of Paul, then maybe God can show mercy to the likes of us.

To the annoyance of the religious leaders of his time, Jesus was forever associating with questionable people—tax collectors and sinners, men and women of doubtful reputation; it wasn’t that he simply hung around with them where *they* were. He actually invited *them* to join him. Surely Mary and Joseph taught him that we are known by the company we keep. Not surprisingly, those good religious folks grumbled. I think we would too. And Jesus tells them, and us, a story. “Suppose one of you had a hundred sheep and lost one. Wouldn’t you leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the lost one until you found it? When found, you can be sure you would put it across your shoulders, rejoicing, and when you got home call in your friends and neighbors saying, ‘Celebrate with me! I’ve found my lost sheep!’ Count on it—there’s more joy in heaven over one sinner’s rescued life than over ninety-nine good people in no need of rescue.

“Or imagine a woman who has ten coins and loses one. Won’t she light a lamp and scour the house, looking in every nook and cranny until she finds it? And when she finds it you can be sure she’ll call her friends and neighbors: ‘Celebrate with me! I found my lost coin!’ Count on it—that’s the kind of party God’s angels throw every time one lost soul turns to God.”¹

¹ Luke 15: 4-7, in The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language, Eugene H. Peterson. NAV Press. © 2002.

There is no place we can go that is outside of God's reach. If you are a poor lost sheep, God is searching for you. If you are a lost coin, God will sweep the house clean until she finds you and when you are found, there will be an enormous celebration.

Mark Batterson of National Community Church in Washington asks two foundational questions related to these parables: "Who are you befriending and who are you offending? Who are you befriending, and who are you offending? If we are befriending religious people and offending irreligious people, then I think we've got Jesus backwards. We think we're following Jesus, but maybe we're following Pharisees. Here's what I know for sure; Jesus was a friend of sinners and Jesus offended Pharisees and I would say go thou and do likewise."²

Part of the good news today is that there is no place we can go that is outside of God's reach. Even when others give up searching, God never gives up. That's the part of this story that is easy and frankly wonderful to hear. The other part of the good news is a little more difficult for those of us who spend our time making every effort to live faithfully, following God's call to holiness in all aspects of our lives. It can be difficult for us to discover Jesus hanging around with people who seem to have no sense of holiness in their lives. We can be offended by the generosity of God when it reaches those we consider beyond God's reach.

When I was a commissioner to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church some years ago, the church was in the midst of long discussions about who can and cannot serve the church. What I found fascinating was that the people who were being excluded because of their so-called sinfulness seemed to throw the best parties; their worship was the most Spirit filled. Jesus seemed especially present there. All that happened while others shook their heads and grumbled. Who are you befriending and who are you offending?

There was a fascinating article in the New York Times last week about Rutgers Presbyterian Church in New York. The title was: What Draws Atheists, Jews and Catholics to a Presbyterian Church. Social Justice and environmental issues unite the people who have come to be part of that congregation.³ The church welcomes all kinds of people to join with them in serving those who are in need. Of course, the members are followers of Jesus but you don't need to be a member or a Christian to join them in their work. Anyone is welcome to be a part of their community. Some of the responses printed on line to the enormous welcome described in the story sound like grumbling religious folks, and I finished the article sensing a wonderful party going on at Rutgers Presbyterian Church—the kind of party I'd like to be a part of. Who are we befriending and who are we offending?

How we read this parable can make all the difference. We are not only sheep who need to be found; we are also shepherds who are sent out to rescue the lost. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that "if you are willing to be a shepherd—then the story begins to sound different. The accent in what Jesus says falls on a different syllable. Repentance is not the issue, but rejoicing; the plot is not about amending our evil ways but about seeking, sweeping, finding, rejoicing. The invitation is not about being rescued by Jesus over and over again, but about joining him in rounding up God's herd and recovering God's treasure. It is about questioning the idea that there are certain conditions the lost must meet before they are eligible to be found, or that there are certain qualities they must exhibit before we will seek them out. It is about trading our high standards on a strong flashlight and swapping our 'good examples' for a good broom. It is about discovering the joy of finding."⁴

Friends there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. Jesus calls: Come rejoice with me!

² Dr. Mark Batterson, National Community Church, Throwing Better Parties—Won't You Be My Neighbor. July 8, 2018.

³ Rick Rojas, New York Times, September 6, 2019.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, The Lost and Found Department, in The Preaching Life. Cowley Publications © 1993.

Let us pray: Loving God, like a shepherd seeking lost sheep, like a woman searching the shadows for a lost coin, so you search for us. Give us the courage to join your great celebrations when the lost are found, especially when those lost are those we consider less worthy, that together we might experience your grace, overflowing for us all. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.