

“No One Comes?”

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Luke 15

² ... the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴“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? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ 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.’ ⁷ 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.

⁸“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? ⁹ 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.’ ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

¹¹ Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

God loves to throw parties. Some people in Jesus’ time did not understand this. When Jesus announced through words and through his life affirming, celebratory way, they resisted.

People have our own ideas of what God is like. Many see God as an object of devotion and the giver of the Law. While there might be some truth to this, God’s law is not meant to be a rule book. When we lose our awareness of God’s compassion and grace, we are missing the point. It’s no wonder people got upset with Jesus. They could see he was a good person. But Jesus chose to associate with people who ... were not like them, who were in fact the ones they classified as sinners.

Pharisees and scribes were considered the most religious people of their day. They would have nothing to do with sinners. They avoided doing business with them and would never eat with them. One commentator explains that scribes and Pharisees did not really want these people to be converted; that they’d rather see them condemned. So they were puzzled that Jesus would spend so much time with such people – and even enjoy their company. On this day, someone expressed their frustration loudly enough for Jesus to hear. “He eats with sinners and treats them like friends!”

Jesus begins a series of stories. “Which of you, if you lost one of the 100 sheep in your care, wouldn’t go looking for it? And when you found it, you’d carry it home and call your friends and neighbors, ‘I found it! Come celebrate with me!’” Everyone would’ve recognized this scene. They’d remember times when it’d happened. In small communities, two or three people cared for the village’s flock. People would sometimes wait up at night for word that a lost sheep had been found, not knowing if it was their sheep or their neighbor’s. Any loss would have been felt by all. And a recovered sheep would have been celebrated.

Next, Jesus tells a story to connect with the women in the crowd. “Imagine a woman had ten silver pieces and lost one.” He has their attention. They all recognize that this is a substantial loss. Such a coin is roughly a day’s wages. Or Jesus may have meant the headdress that married women wore of ten silver coins on a chain. Youngsters would save for years to collect those coins.

Either way – as money or ornamentation – it’s lost. We can imagine the panic, the grief. In her shadowy house – there’s only one small window – it’ll be impossible to find! Still the woman is determined. She lights the lamp and sweeps her earthen floor. And she prays, no doubt, as her eyes strain to spy that tiny coin.

There it is! She calls her friends and neighbors. ‘I found it! Come celebrate with me!’” Can’t you imagine the women and men nodding as Jesus finishes his tale?

Lastly, Jesus tells a story of a father and two sons. The younger one leaves home, squanders his inheritance and comes back – ashamed, hungry and maybe a little wiser. He’s unkempt; his clothing worn and filthy. Yet to his father he is beautiful. “This calls for a party. Rosin up the bow! Hang the crepe paper streamers. Spread the news! My boy is alive and home!”

You probably noticed a common theme in these stories: Something precious is lost. The lost is found. Everyone parties. Often we focus on the sheep, the coin and the prodigal. Today, we’re going to look at God’s part in them because God has a problem. Jesus draws a map for us when he repeats, “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change theirs.”

If the return of one person causes heaven to celebrate, this must be a truly big deal. Religious leaders found such an idea distasteful, yet Jesus says heaven celebrates.

Think about the stories. Someone finds the lost coin or the sheep – or the son comes home – and friends celebrate. Where are God’s friends? Heaven celebrates, but doesn’t God have any friends?

Maybe you think, “The angels celebrate. They’re better than people.” But since angels have no firsthand experience with reconciliation – coming home – they’re not able to put their all into celebrating. The thing that makes friends such good partyers is that they know about losing and finding. They know about being lost and being found.

When the shepherd comes over the hill with that sheep or the woman spots her coin, friends can lean close and say, “I know just how you feel. The same thing happened to me.” So much of the joy of celebration comes from being able to share it with others, and having them sharing it with us.

Most of you can imagine how the homemaker or the shepherd feel when they find what was lost. What would it’ve been like if they had had nobody to rejoice with them? If someone you love is estranged and then, against all hope, the two of you come together again, wouldn’t you just have to tell someone? Wouldn’t you be telling everyone who’d listen?

Just maybe, part of what Jesus wants his listeners, and to us, to understand is that God is just so joy-filled when some struggling person approaches the Holy that God calls a party. God calls to all us religious, churchy types, and says, “Celebrate with me! This sad, wandering woman has become a new person. That man who was lost in apathy just awoken to life. They’re a bit rough right now, but they are found. As a faithful person, I knew you’d be glad so I’m inviting you to come be glad with me.”

I remember a song I learned when I was nine or ten.

A certain man held a feast on his fine estate in town.
He laid a festive table and wore a wedding gown.
He sent invitations to his neighbors far and wide
but when the meal was ready, each of them replied:
I cannot come...

When do you do this? When do you choose not to be a part of God’s celebration of life lost and found again?

Christopher Smart, an 18th century poet, went through a period of mental illness. Eventually in the midst of his depression and self-medication, he came to accept God’s presence in his life. He became a Christian. Listen to this line from one of his poems:

For I am come home again,
but there is nobody to kill the calf or to play the musick.

When do we as a church miss our chance to have a potluck and karaoke? How often do we fail to throw the party when a wandering or lost one comes home, when one who is addicted surfaces, a convicted one tries again or a broken one mends?

Poor God. There is nothing the divine Love wants so much as to have everyone come home, everyone recovered. And each time, to say, “Let’s party! ... Sabrina is stepping beyond her depression ... Carla has dared to walk away after years of abuse ... Samuel has dared to connect with people who remind him that I care and am there for him. Let’s celebrate!”

Some of us may be good at joining in, but many of us come up with one excuse after another. Do we really want that homeless person to join us? Many people experience more welcome at the A.A. meeting elsewhere in the church than they would in the sanctuary on Sunday morning.

I’ve made a commitment to ride my bike more this summer. I want to be one of those people who ride instead of driving. Now I have to follow through. It’s both words and action. What kind of a person do you want to be – one who makes excuses or one who parties with God? What kind of church do we want to be?

Once again, Jesus says – three times – that there’s a celebration for even one person who changes their heart and life. Like me with my biking, he refers to both heart and life – commitment and response.

God invites us to join the party. How do we answer?

This sermon is taken from J. Ellsworth Kalas’ *Parables from the Back Side: Bible Stories with a Twist*, chapter 2 “God Called a Party, but Nobody Came,” (Abingdon: Nashville, 1991), 18-25.