

Homecoming Rejoicing
Luke 15:1-10
September 11, 2016
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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 people 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.'

One of our members, our clerk of session, Ani Lele'a, told me about a time in 2004 when she was selected by the Presbyterian Witness Policy of the General Assembly to be one of 21 representatives sent to Lebanon for the Advocacy Committee for Women. She was traveling to the Middle East via Paris, and she had never traveled by herself before; so fortunately, she was meeting a fellow Presbyterian at the San Francisco airport, and they would fly together, and then ride together to the hotel for the conference.

The day arrived, and at the airport, she waited for him and waited and waited, and he did not show up. It was time to board the plane. Still, her associate was nowhere to be found. She boarded the plane, alone. She was panicked, wondering not only where was her travel partner but also realizing that when she arrived, she had no idea where to go. She had been advised not to carry her itinerary because of security issues. She had counted on her associate to have all the information about transportation and various locations of their destinations. Not only did she not know the address of the hotel where she was to stay, she didn't know the name of the hotel. She had no phone numbers. And of course, she didn't speak Lebanese.

She was upset, abandoned, and forlorn. She questioned her judgment in agreeing to go on the trip, her kids had advised her not to go. She questioned the judgment of the presbytery to arrange the trip. She could not remember a time when she was more disoriented, more lost. She felt completely doomed.

As she walked out of the gate with tears blurring her vision, she caught sight of a sign... with her name on it. How could it be? Was she seeing things? She approached the man with the sign and indeed, the presbytery had arranged to meet her at the gate. She was found! Suffice it to say there was a large gathering that

evening of joyous celebration. It is a profoundly wonderful feeling to have been lost, and then found. We all have experienced times when we were lost, perhaps like Ani, in a foreign country far from home, or lost on a trail in the woods, or perhaps figuratively, lost on a career path that didn't make sense, or lost in a family where we felt misunderstood.

In the Gospel passage today, we are left to wonder who are the lost? At first reading, it seems the lost are those tax collectors, those sinners who have come near to listen to Jesus. The well educated and righteous, the Pharisees and scribes, grumble that Jesus is keeping company with these types, the lost, despised and marginalized people. Tax collectors were thieves; and sinners, whether they be prostitutes or lepers or murderers, were not worthy of being in the presence of those who had worked so hard to uphold their righteousness. Jesus' judgment is questioned. He, a learned rabbi, should be separating himself from the sinners, keeping a clear distance so as not to become tainted, to not have his reputation compromised, surely not welcome them and certainly not eat with them. Yuck!

Jesus does not agree with the Pharisees and scribes, nor does he reprimand them. Instead, he offers a parable. In the parable, Jesus challenges them to consider the search for one lost sheep, leaving 99 in the wilderness until the lost one is found. And in case this one didn't hit home, he offers another parable, about a woman who loses a coin and searches and sweeps late into the night as her lamp is lit, until she finds it.

In the chapel of St. Vincent's Hospital, on West 11th St. in Manhattan, there are four loose-leaf binders brought out every year on this very day, September 11th, for a memorial Mass. The binders contain fliers that were on the Missing Persons Wall in late September 2001, 15 years ago. They are arranged alphabetically. My breath was taken away as I clicked on the link and scrolled through the pages and pages and pages of fliers of smiling people, all ages, all races, all nationalities, some holding babies or hugging a spouse, some dressed in uniform. All missing.

The first flier I saw, said: Don Adams, worked at Cantor Fitzgerald, 105th floor, with a photo of a young man holding his baby daughter, and underneath it said, husband, father, friend, we pray for you. Another, a photo of a smiling man in round gold-rimmed glasses, read: Missing: 2 WTC 92nd Floor Paul Benedetti, weight 135 pounds, height 5'7, wearing silver wedding band and silver watch on left hand, contact Alessandra. Another read: A Hero Among Heros, our cousin, Police Officer James Leahy, loving husband and father of 3 boys, we pray for your and all those still missing safe return.

Missing NYC Firefighter, Ladder 7, Robert Foti, If you have seen him please call or pray for him; Missing: Lucy Fishman, last seen at WTC 2 on 9/11/01, wearing white shirt and black pants, wedding band engraved with date of 9/9/95, worked for AON on the 105th floor; Missing, Timothy Haskell, squad 18 Firefighter, also missing his

brother captain Tommy Haskell, please call, we are missing you, and next to the photo is a hand-drawn sad face with tears streaming down.

If we were born before the millennium, we all remember where we were when we heard the news 15 years ago. We all remember seeing the images, unlike anything we had ever seen before. We were all lost. The world as we knew it was gone, our former security, lost. My 5 year-old son asked that evening, as I tucked him into bed, "Mommy, why did he do that? Why did that man crash into that building?" And I was at a loss for words. "Lord, What do I say," I prayed, "to keep the nightmares away?" The day before, when at preschool had and his friends had built the toy block towers and then knocked them down with awe and laughter, definitely didn't seem so funny or harmless anymore. Innocence was lost.

My best friend from high school called to tell me that our friend, John Henwood, who had taken me to the junior prom, worked at Cantor Fitzgerald on the 101st floor of the World Trade Center and he was one of those who perished. Cantor Fitzgerald, an investment bank, lost 2/3 of its New York workforce that day -- 658 employees. John was one of them. His sister, Tara, also a dear friend, has her birthday on September 11th. She was lost for many, many years.

God has a way of restoring us. I grew up near New York City, and on my first visit back since 9/11, a couple of years after the attacks, I was completely amazed. There was a palpable joy, a celebration in that city that I had never before witnessed. People seemed friendlier, more open, more helpful, less guarded, uptight and out for themselves. It was truly mind-boggling to me at the time. How can it be? I wondered. All the loss and devastation, I guess I had expected a dark shadow over the city, people wandering around, lost and forsaken, still in shock and fear.

It was the exact opposite. There was a connection between people, a pleasant and approachable acknowledgment between people, between strangers, passers-by. This was not the pre-9/11 New York I remembered. Could it be that in vulnerability, people acknowledged their need and appreciation for one another? That their commonalities and love for the city brought them strength and brought them together? Gave them new life? The big city of New York seemed smaller. There was a welcoming there, truly a rejoicing, a Spirit of new life.

Whatever security had been lost in the 9/11 attacks, there was a celebratory atmosphere that permeated the very atoms in the air. People had found their strength, and it was clear that they had found it by reaching out to one another. In a city of the lost, they had found one another. They had been reclaimed, rescued, and it extended to those of us who were now outsiders, vacationers, visitors. We were welcomed into their community in love and it felt like a big party. Cafes spilled out into the streets, music blared out storefronts and car windows, and people high fived one another with a skip in their steps.

Today, I love seeing the photos on Facebook of my friend, Tara, with her husband and small, happy children. I can tell her life is filled with joy again, on this birthday, mixed with tragedy and triumph. God indeed restores us.

In the New Testament passage from 1 Timothy read today, the author says, "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 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."

This is the Jesus in the Luke passage who welcomes and dines with the sinners, who rejoices that they have come to listen, who shares that heaven and angels rejoice when the former blasphemers, persecutors, and violent, through God's mercy and patience, are judged as faithful and appointed for God's service. This rejoicing is what I experienced in my New York visit 13 some years ago -- a sense of gratitude for the mercy that was given to the people of New York, who had been through a terrible, tragic time, and had found new life. There *was* celebration, because the lost among the living had been found.

The gospel passage from Luke highlights the celebration that transpires when the lost sheep and the lost coin are found. *When the shepherd finds the one lost sheep, the text reads, 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 people who need no repentance. And when the woman finds her coin, the text reads: 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.'*

So in the Luke passage, who are the lost that the sheep and the coin are meant to represent in Jesus' parables? Is it the sinners, the marginalized who come to hear Jesus and eat with him? Or is the Pharisees and scribes, who are unable to see the cause for celebration, that God is about love rather than rules, and joy rather than anger or fear or impatience. Jesus is saying that anytime anyone is drawn back into relationship with God, or chooses life, or lives into his or her potential, or helps out another, in all these ways is found. And that is something to celebrate.

So maybe it is those who believe they are already found, those who think they are with the 99 sheep, that the parable is meant to bring to repentance. Those who don't want certain people sitting at their righteous table... because even the righteous are people who are lost. It is okay for us to admit this: that we are each in our own way, at some times, lost.

The good news is that when we turn to God for any reason, God jumps for joy and invites all the angels to one heck of a celebratory party. The parable really isn't ultimately about who is a sinner and who is righteous, or who is lost and who is found. It is, ultimately, about a God who loves each one of us so much, that this God will keep searching for us until we are found. God is holding up the sign, with our name on it, and all we have to do is look up, and wipe the tears from our eyes, and see it. And know that we have been found; that when we turn to God, we are home.

On this Homecoming Sunday, may we rejoice together that we have each chosen to come through the doors today, into this place to gather, to lift up the lost that they may be found, and to celebrate the faithful and never-ending love of our God.