

“A Joyful Mess”
Luke 15.1-10
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17th Sunday after Pentecost
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I was talking with a new-comer to our church this week, someone who grew up in Baltimore, who was telling me how he moved back from a place not too far from here. “It was gorgeous,” he said, describing the clean streets, friendly neighbors, safe, almost idyllic place where he had been living. “Well, why did you move?” I asked? He paused, thought hard for a moment shook his head and said, “Being from Baltimore, it just didn’t feel right.”

It took me back to last year on a rainy fall evening. Kate and I had just left dinner last year after having one of those serious spousal check-in times. One where we ask each other, how are you *really* doing? And are we still called to be here in Baltimore? We’ve been here almost 12 years. How are you feeling about it? How are *you* feeling about it? It was a good conversation and as we were driving into the dark, rainy night, miserable by most standards, Kate was reflective, almost wistful, “I’m just not sure,” she ventured, “what it is about Baltimore that grabs you. . .” Just as she finished the sentence, we rounded a corner to find a man standing in the middle of a Hamden street, soaking wet in his white t-shirt, cheering, both hands raised in a concert-like salute, screaming out to no one in particular. “That’s it,” I said pointing at the man. “*That’s* what grabs you.”

Living or working or worshiping in our city, it’s almost impossible to get arrogant about anything. We can’t gloat over our sports teams, at least not often enough to make us as annoying as New York. Poverty is disproportionately high, 40% of our streets are labeled substandard. And I heard recently that we made the top ten list for the most unattractive people in America. I’m glad I could help with that effort. As much as I and many of you long for systemic change in our home, I love the fact that we couldn’t be pretentious if we wanted to. It’s like we’re all part of one big AA meeting – one where we have to admit first and foremost that we’re powerless to get ourselves out of the big mess that we’re all a part of before we are able to realize the power of God to change ourselves. The big mess of segregation, of middle-class flight and the devastated economy that first set it in motion, of broken government, drugs and guns and violence.

I know that some people are glad to leave that mess – those who have the choice to do so. Some people absolutely need to get out for their own mental health. Head to a place with cleaner streets, friendly neighbors, safe, almost idyllic. Everyone deserves a break from that mess though not everyone has the means to get that break. But there’s something about not having to pretend that your home is whole. Something about knowing you can’t deceive others, much less yourself about the truth of the world you inhabit and your own place in it that makes it easier to encounter God, and easier to encounter each other.

That’s the way I think it must seem for the one sheep that’s lost in the wilderness. That one sheep finds itself alone and helpless. It knows it’s in danger in

the wilderness. The rest of the sheep don't seem to recognize that that they are just as vulnerable. The text makes clear that they are in the wilderness, too – 100% of the sheep. All of them are subject to the dangers of the land, of predators, the potential for death. But it's not clear to me that the 99 know that about themselves. It seems more like they take for granted the fact that someone's leading them through that wilderness. Someone is protecting them guiding them, making sure they have food and water. It's easy to not notice the shepherd when you are surrounded with everything you need – food, water, companions. It's easy to fail to recognize that you are still in the wilderness, still vulnerable, still the beneficiary of guidance and provision, and protection you .

Which is exactly what the religious leaders do according to Luke. They see the tax collectors and sinners and grumble to themselves, “this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” They grumble because they don't think of themselves as in any wilderness. They don't think of themselves as in need of any support. They don't think of themselves as deficient – quite the opposite – they think of themselves as better.

Which seems to be the temptation that Jesus warns against again and again in Luke's gospel. The temptation to point out the speck in your neighbor's eye but miss the log in your own. The temptation to think that God cares more about holding right opinions, or practicing the correct rituals, or supporting the right causes more than God cares for actual people that all those opinions, and rituals, and causes are supposed to be about.

So you get a little bit of money and you look around and think to yourself, “it's all because of my work ethic or my talent that I'm wealthier than others.” You get a little more education and think to yourself, “I know more about what my neighbor needs than he knows himself.” You get a little bit of spiritual acumen and think to yourself, “I am so much more enlightened than most.”

Jesus challenges the religious leaders around their arrogance toward sinners and tax collectors. He doesn't defend either. Tax collectors were Jews who collected taxes on behalf of their Roman occupiers. They made wealth off the oppression of their own people which is why they were so hated and considered traitors. Jesus doesn't defend them. Sinners were those who had broken religious law. Jesus doesn't defend them, either. He simply states that God goes after lost people. God tracks them down and brings them home. God doesn't give up on them.

But notice the challenge to the religious leaders: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he find it?” “Which one of you. . .” I think Jesus knows that most human shepherds with common sense would leave 99, compliant sheep – those who are doing exactly what they are supposed to do – to go after the one. He knows that the religious leaders' attention is with those they've declared righteous, not with those who are lost. They wouldn't leave the 99. And if we are honest, we wouldn't leave them either.

The church has tended to pile that truth on as judgment. The effect is to pressure us to go after the lost, to pressure us to be more like God, to pressure us toward more self-improvement. But pointing out the truth of sin's reach seems to miss the extraordinary good news that Jesus is trying to announce – God's grace

knows no bounds. God doesn't give up on anyone no matter how lost, no matter how broken, no matter how hurt. Wherever there is pain and suffering and injustice and oppression in our world, you can be sure that God is there.

Which is extraordinarily good news if you are living in a place that is clearly lost, or if you have enough humility about you to know that there are some parts of you that are lost as well. There is no human being who is as generous and as loving and persistent as God. God doesn't give up on you. God doesn't give up on me. God doesn't give up on us.

The real question is, according to Jesus, is not can you match God, but can you celebrate that news whenever you see it? "Rejoice with me," the shepherd tells his friends and neighbors. "I've found my sheep that was lost." "Rejoice with me," the woman in the second parable tells her friends and neighbors, "for I have found the coin that was lost." "Rejoice with me." It's the only command I can find in these two stories. Not an admonition to do more or be more. Just an invitation to rejoice.

The trouble with the religious leaders, Jesus implies, is not that they don't go after the tax collectors or the sinners. It's not that they haven't done what they ought to do. It's that they can't seem to celebrate mercy that seems undeserved, grace that is not earned. Justice, to them, is about making someone else pay, someone else fall, someone else hurt. But justice for God seems more about drawing the circle wider, bringing people back into it, restoring relationships that maybe human beings incapable of restoring.

Coming out of the city council meeting on Thursday it was hard to catch any glimpses of any circles like that. I watched a white man shouting down Glenna Huber, the Episcopal priest who serves with me as BUILD co-chair. The vitriol on his face directed at this African-American female religious leader and my friend, reminded me of videos of the some of the Trump rallies I've seen. The content of the politics was surely different, but the hate felt the same. There were some compelling arguments, to be sure, on the other side of the table made by some good people whom I respect. Maybe we should have pushed for more inclusion in the affordable housing and less on the local hiring mandates. Maybe we should have pushed more on wages and less on affordable housing. Maybe we could have just gotten more than \$135 million and that pipeline of jobs so desperately needed for our city's most disenfranchised residents.

But I couldn't help but wonder if what made people the angriest is to see religious leaders sitting at a table with notorious tax collectors and sinners. To see us consort with people you do not consort with, to argue and wrestle with people you are supposed to know only as symbols, not as people. To see us deliver real benefit to the city's most vulnerable but at the expense of our own perceived purity and righteousness.

There are times when the most prophetic thing the church can do is speak truth to power – tell it like it is. I surely believe that. But I've also discovered a different kind of prophetic role of the church – to share a table with people you don't think deserve to be there. In a post-9/11 world, perhaps that kind of prophecy is more important than ever. Or as one of our recent high school graduates texted to his mom by way of encouragement, "Tell Andrew that from what I've seen in the

world, at least this elections cycle, the ‘true believers’ need the compromisers more than the compromisers need the true believers.”

It’s easier to stomach that loss of your self-righteous veneer, if you already understand yourself to be a guest at that table, way less than perfect, vulnerable and in need of God’s grace. It’s easier if you live in a city where perfection would seem fake if you ran into it. It’s easier if you already consider yourself part of one big AA meeting, where everybody starts with the same admission that we’re all a mess, powerless to change without God’s grace. God’s amazing, unmerited, grace that never gives up on any of us.