

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2010

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Scriptures: Jeremiah 4: 1-4, 18-21; Psalm 14; Luke 15:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17

THE REJOICING OF HEAVEN

"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Jesus is the one who welcomes sinners and eats with them. What a stumbling block that idea was to the Pharisees of Jesus' time and what a stumbling block it is to the Pharisees of our day. There are some we might call Christian Pharisees who would never eat and drink with the lost souls, the sinners who are all around. Who wants to be involved with the lost, they ask. As if the saved are too good to be worried about the lost. There is only one who saves and that One is God. God's very nature is to save. The very nature of Jesus was to seek out those who needed salvation and to be with them, showing them the love and mercy of God. The church should never be a place which shuns sinners in need of Christ, yet that is what happens sometimes, even in churches.

Our UCC slogan says: "No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!" When we think about it, we have to admit that there are many different life journeys aren't there? Mine is different from yours, and yours is different from the person sitting in the next pew. Not only are we on different journeys, but we are at different places in that journey. I don't know about you, but when look at my life's journey and picture myself along the way, I find that I like myself better at some places of the journey than at others. Why? Well, I like to think that all along the way I have learned some things about life, about God and about my fellow human beings. And I know that there were some places along my way that the angels in heaven were not really rejoicing over me. Jesus told two stories, one about a lost sheep and the other about a lost coin, and he said, "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." What a great picture comes to our minds when we think of the angels in heaven rejoicing

over the repentance of one sinner. We in the church should want to be part of that joyful praise party. We need to be about giving the lost a place to be found, a home of acceptance, and a family of sinners saved by grace. When the Christian Pharisees begin to murmur against what we do, we can remind them that it was Jesus who taught us to associate with the lost and to rejoice in those who are found by God.

A family moved into a new home. They came from another city, and they were grateful that they had found a good house in a quiet neighborhood where the children could grow and play and go to school. Their first night in their new home was a Saturday, and shortly after the children had been put to bed, a very loud noise erupted from right across the street! Music was blaring, cars were pulling into the driveway and others were parked up and down the streets. There was shouting and laughter and just plain bedlam! People were even dancing in the driveway! This went on for hours and hours, and the new couple was devastated. Did they have to look forward to this kind of thing every weekend they wondered? How could they raise their young children in an atmosphere like that? What would they do they asked themselves as they sat up that first night talking about their plight?

The next day it did not take long for them to find out the reason for all the noise and partying the night before, and the reason made all the difference in the world. The husband and wife who lived across the street were the parents of a son who had gone off to fight in a war. After many months, the couple had received word that their son had been declared missing in action. The government was trying to find him, but he was presumed dead. Nearly a year passed and the poor parents lived in a state of grief and heartbreak. Then, one day several US Army officials came to their door and told them that their son had been found alive, gravely injured but alive. He had been held as a prisoner all that time, and for some reason he was suddenly set free. Maybe it was because of his injuries. The young man had lost a leg and he suffered from

repeated infections and pneumonia. He would be in a military hospital in the states until he could recover enough to return home— if he could recover enough.

Yesterday had been the day! He flew home with his parents and arrived there in the evening. His friends, his parents' friends, the townspeople, all wanted to be able to celebrate his homecoming. So, they planned a party, an all-night party, a party with music and dancing, all of the foods the young man had ever said he liked in his whole life: gallons of bubble-gum-flavor ice cream, beer and Coke and Mountain Dew, pizza and his mom's own potato salad, barbecued chicken and ribs, apple pie, jello with lots of whipped cream, and chocolate layer cake. The young soldier was a well-loved hero. He had been lost, but now he was found. The rejoicing had gone on for hours and hours! Everyone had known about the party ahead of time, everyone except the new neighbors. But that was all right, because the next day the new couple across the street decided that they had moved into just the right neighborhood! And they rejoiced too!

Let me be very clear. The church should be in the business of providing the setting and the information which help a person to see their need for Christ, but it is God who does the saving, not the church, and not a person. It is the good shepherd who went out searching for his one lost sheep even though he had 99 others back in the fold. It is the woman who still had nine coins who could not rest until she had looked in every dark corner and found the one coin she had lost.

By the way, do you know the reason the main character in Jesus' story about the lost coin was a woman? Easy. If it had been a man, he would have just stood in the middle of the house and yelled, "Hey, Honey, do you know where I put my lost coin?" And the woman would have ended up doing what she did anyway.

Seriously though, just as the sheep and the coin could not save themselves, so

we cannot save ourselves. It is the work of God. We only need to be open to the Savior's calling so that God may do God's work and the angels can get heaven's party started.

"A parable is told about an old man who used to meditate each day by the Ganges River in India. One morning he saw a scorpion floating on the water. When the scorpion drifted near the old man he reached to rescue it but was stung by the scorpion. A bit later he tried again and was stung again, the bite swelling his hand and giving him much pain. Another man passing by saw what was happening and yelled at the first man, "Hey, stupid old man, what's wrong with you? Only a fool would risk his life for sake of an ugly, evil creature. Don't you know you could kill yourself trying to save that ungrateful scorpion?" The old man calmly replied, "My friend, just because it is in the scorpion's nature to sting, does not change my nature to save." Henry Nouwen said about this parable, "It is in **God's** nature to save."

God is in the business of looking at the ugliness and evil in men and women and wanting them to be as they were created to be, pure and holy and good. Pretty tall order considering some of the creepy people who live on this earth. Yet, there were creepy people in Jesus's day too. They were the ones he sat down at the table with, those he ate with, the sinners. God has a long history of waiting for sinners to come to their senses, to choose God's way instead of their own selfish desires which always leads to destruction. Listen to the words of the prophet Jeremiah once again:

22 "My people are fools;
 they do not know me.
 They are senseless children;
 they have no understanding.
 They are skilled in doing evil;
 they know not how to do good."

23 I looked at the earth,
and it was formless and empty;
and at the heavens,
and their light was gone.

Jeremiah was not called the “weeping prophet” for no reason. For forty years he preached against the kingdom of Judah for their apostasy and their turning away from the Lord. He endured so much for the sake of his people; beatings, imprisonment, and even being thrown into a muddy cistern. He looked at the state of the people of Judah, who even in the midst of destruction looked to their enemies and not to God for help, and he saw that they had become like the earth before God had created light. Their light was gone. There is no rejoicing in heaven in their future, no breaking through of the kingdom of God into their lives. They were all emptiness and darkness.

Jesus Christ said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Jesus came as the light of the world, and he brought it into the darkest corners, into places that no one ever thought that the Son of God would or should go. He shared meals with the worst of the worst, the business of Jesus is still the business of ministering to the worst of the worst. Does that include the drug addicts and those with AIDS? Yes! Does that include those who are in prison? Yes! Does that include those who lie to us and steal from us, those who cheat us every chance they get. Yes! You might wonder how I can say that. Let me explain it this way. If Jesus came into this church this morning, sat in our pews, sang from our hymnal, and drank coffee with us downstairs, this is what he would find. He would find people who still need to be saved as the expression goes— people who have yet to make up their minds and choose to believe in Jesus as Savior. And he would find other people who have already “decided to follow Jesus” as the hymn says, but who have gotten off track and found it easier and easier to give in to sin. Would

Jesus walk away from the worst among us? I say no, But to me the even greater mercy is that he would not and does not walk away from the rest of us— we who already know him and yet tend to stop fully trusting in him to guide our lives and turn to our own ways like lost sheep.

Friends, the church is a sacred place with a sacred calling. Here we are to be welcoming to all from the highest to the lowest, for who knows which one most needs to be found by God. We provide the place, the church, and we provide ourselves, never forgetting who we are. You or I may be one of the lost or one of the found —either way we need to celebrate every time someone is found because it is very, very scary to be lost. Have you ever been lost, physically lost— not knowing where you were? We always look at these parables of Jesus through the eyes the shepherd or the woman, but what if we look at the story through the eyes of the one lost? How does the lost sheep feel when it is dark and he is alone, when he is caught in the thorns and can't get loose as he listens to the call of the wolf in the not too great distance? It must be horrible. Still, millions of human beings have experienced that lostness and have discovered what it means when God in the person of Jesus Christ seeks them out and finds them. It is our story personally, and it is the church's story too. We are a family of people who share the history of lostness and found-ness.

Maybe you are here this morning still in that lost place. Perhaps you are always hiding in some corner afraid to admit to yourself that you need help, the help of God. You have come to the right place. We all begin in the same place with God, sinners in the need of God's grace. It is how you end up that makes the difference.

Francis Thompson wrote a poem called "The Hound of Heaven" over 100 years ago. It is the story of a man pursued by God throughout his life, the man always looking for love, searching for fulfillment but never finding it because he avoids the

source of love and fulfillment which is God. The first verse goes like this:

I FLED Him, down the nights and down the days;
 I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
 I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
 Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
 I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
 Up vistaed hopes I sped;
 And shot, precipitated,
 Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,
 From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
 But with unhurrying chase,
 And unperturbèd pace,
 Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
 They beat—and a Voice beat
 More instant than the Feet—
 ‘All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.’

The man is betrayed over and over and his dreams shattered all because he does not heed the hound of heaven who will not stop wanting him.

Those who have heard the footsteps of that hound of heaven beating in pursuit, and known the call of his voice should be people of rejoicing and celebrating. A worship service or even a church meeting of Christians should never be carried on with sour expressions and mean spirits. We should remember that in heaven the angels are rejoicing and so should we. Joy should mark our times together because in our lostness the hand of God has been laid upon us and upon our sisters and brothers in Christ. We are found, saved and held up by God. Amen!