

Luke 15:1-10

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.’

Luke 15:11-32

Then Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. 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. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 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. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 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! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” 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. 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.” 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. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.

‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years, I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

In our stories this morning, Jesus is still on his way to Jerusalem. Lots of tax collectors and other people whom the Gospel writer calls "sinners" are following Jesus, and listening closely to what he says. These people are outsiders in proper Jewish society. Some probably are prostitutes or collaborators with the Roman occupiers, but most are probably just poor people, people too poor to make a good showing at the High Holy Days. People who were not upper-class respectable, or even middle-class respectable. You know, the same people who followed that John the Baptist character in the wilderness.

The Pharisees and scribes, the respectable religious leaders, start grumbling about this, and saying that Jesus cannot be all that great, because he is welcoming *those people*, and even eating with them! They sound like Simon when the woman washed Jesus' feet, don't they?

"Those people are hopeless, Rabbi. I feel sorry for some of them, I mean it's true that they did not get a fair lot in life, or some of them didn't, but, still, they have chosen that life, or had it chosen for them. We cannot relax our standards for them. They are just not our kind of people. That's just how it works."

Now you see why these poor people are flocking to Jesus. They are coming and listening to what Jesus says, because what he says is different from what they hear in

the Temple. Jesus is saying that they themselves are worth paying attention to. Jesus is reminding them that it is not only the rich and powerful who are made in God's image.

So Jesus tells some stories. He asks the question, which of the people listening to him would not leave ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to go find one that was lost? The true answer is probably, "Most of them." Anyone doing a purely rational, objective, cost-benefit, risk-reward study would say to stay with the ninety-nine and write off the one as a business loss. Thank God, God's ways are not our ways.

Jesus continues, telling the story of the shepherd lifting the two-hundred-pound sheep up on his shoulders and rejoicing. When the shepherd gets home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and they have a party, because he has found the sheep that was lost.

He tells another story, about a woman who has ten coins, and she loses one. She lights a bright lamp and cleans her house from top to bottom until she finds the lost coin. When she finds it, she, too, calls her friends and neighbors to rejoice because she found her lost coin.

He tells a third story, about a runaway son who comes home. In this story, the Father runs to welcome his prodigal son home. It's the only place in the Scriptures where God is portrayed as hurrying.¹ The Father throws an extravagant party to welcome his son home. The only one who refuses to rejoice is the older brother, who refuses to come into the party. He is, in his own way, as lost as his brother ever was, refusing to take part in welcoming the prodigal home.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1996).

In each of these stories, there is joy over the ninety-nine sheep who were not lost. There is joy over the nine coins that did not need to be found. The Father explains to his older son that he had always brought his Father joy, but there is now joy over his brother, who had been lost, and was found.

And heaven's joy is like God's grace – it is infinite. The older brother fundamentally misunderstands the situation. There is not any less joy over his faithful service because there is joy over his brother coming home. I would like to believe that the older brother walks into the party and gives his returned brother a hug.

Let me tell you a story.² This is a story I saw happen many years ago, back when I was a distance runner. Yes, you wouldn't guess it to look at me now, but I used to be a distance runner. Strictly middle-of-the-pack at best, but a runner. This story was back, probably in the late 1980's. I ran a ten-kilometer race on a Saturday morning.

This was not one of those big charity races, with television cameras and thousands of spectators. This was a smaller race, with a few hundred participants and very few spectators. When the winners finished the race, I'm told that there were not very many people there to cheer them on. But when the last finisher came stumbling across the finish line and nearly collapsed on top of his knee brace, there were hundreds of us cheering him on.

In a race like that, the first-place finishers receive the least praise, because nobody but the angels, sorry, the race staff, is there to see them finish. And what joy is

² I did witness this as a teenager; it is legitimately my story. However, the interpretation owes a debt to sermons from Rev. Jim Browne (who was one of the few spectators) and Rev. Chris Duckworth.

there when a twenty-year-old college track star cruises to victory in a community race? Everyone expected him to win the race. He got a trophy and, as Jesus would say, “Surely he has already received his reward.”

But, when the overweight sixty-eight-year-old with achy joints and a knee brace on his bad knee sweated through the race, and crossed the finish line in last place after running 6.2 miles without stopping to walk even once, the whole gathered crowd of racers (who had already finished the race, cooled down, and stretched), put down our Gatorades and bananas to cheer on this last place finisher.

The cheers were louder, and words of encouragement more plentiful, and admiration greater for this last runner than they were for the first-place finisher. Because we all knew that the last place runner spent more time suffering on the course, and overcame more challenges, than any other runner in the race. His finishing did not make our finishes any less significant, or reduce our accomplishments one iota. But the fact remained, this last-place finisher’s accomplishment was more significant than ours were.

This is how it is in the Kingdom of Heaven. The heavenly host will hoot and holler more loudly for the people who stumble and straggle into the Kingdom than for those who sprint in, hardly breaking a sweat.

Here on Earth, however, we do not always see other people’s struggles. This causes two opposite temptations.

If we pretend that we are better than everyone else, that we do not struggle but everyone else does, then we have missed the point. It looks to us like we are the only

good people, and we ought to be protected from all *those people*. This is the sin committed by so many Pharisees in the Gospels, and by so many people today. When we do this, we are the Prodigal's older brother, who was so lost that he did not even realize he was lost.

If we assume that we are the only ones struggling, or that our own struggle is, of course, more difficult than those of other people, then we have missed the point. If we compare our daily struggles with other people's highlight reels, it sure looks like they have it easy, doesn't it? It looks to us like *we* have it hard, *they* have it easy. *We* should not have to do anything, and *they* should work harder. When we do this, we are the Prodigal refusing to come home, and instead insisting that his Father and his brother must come to him in a foreign country.

No matter what you are struggling with, kindness doesn't cost a thing. Sprinkle that stuff everywhere.³

Graciousness doesn't cost a thing.

No matter what you are struggling with, consider that other people may be struggling with difficulties that you know nothing about. They probably are.

Interpret the words and actions of others in light of that consideration.

God knows everything that they are struggling with, and God is cheering them on to faithfully persevere in the race before them.

³ Paraphrased from Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, whose version of that statement works for her ministry context, but not mine.

We are not competing with them – there is enough joy in Heaven for all of us.
Don't be the Prodigal's older brother.

If we are willing to cheer them on, too, instead of judging them, then, and only then, do we get to join God as part of that great raucous crowd of witnesses at the finish line, welcoming them home.⁴

May this be so for all of us.

AMEN.

⁴ Hebrews 12:1