

### Questions Jesus Asked:

‘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?’

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First United Methodist Church, Baraboo

Pastor Marianne Cotter

Our gospel reading today begins with a dinner table conversation. Jesus invites the tax collectors to have dinner with him. This gets the Pharisees really mad. Even though Jesus invites them to the party too, they refuse. If Jesus is such a great rabbi why is openly violating the law, and eat with these sinners? The tax collectors are really listening to Jesus, which means they are being converted. But the Pharisees aren't glad these sinners are repenting. They are grumbling instead.

In response, Jesus asks two questions. “Which 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?” Jesus was a good teacher but he would have been a lousy shepherd. Just asking this question shows how little he knows about shepherding. For a shepherd with 100 sheep to go in search of one that is lost would mean risking everything. Those 99 left alone could have been attacked by a wolf or stolen by another shepherd. To leave 99 sheep in search of one lamb is not a wise business choice.

“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?” This makes more sense. Spending a whole day trying to recover it is smart. These stories are not about shepherds or housekeepers but about the long reach of God's love. God's diligence, God's unwillingness to give up until everything that belongs to God is restored. The numbers 10 and 100 point to completeness; 9 and 99 to incompleteness. The shepherd had 100 sheep. Now he has 99. Some would say, that's OK you still have a lot of sheep. For the shepherd to be satisfied knowing one has been lost would be like losing your keys but knowing your spouse has a spare set. Sure, you'll be OK. Eventually. But Until you get those lost keys back, you're going to feel like something isn't quite right. It's the same with God. God isn't satisfied until all are reconciled to God.

Notice in both these stories the focus is not on rescuing what has been lost on but what happens once the sheep, once the coin is found. The focus is on the party, the celebration. If we were to keep reading in Luke 15, we'd come to story too ends with rejoicing: the story of the prodigal son. In that story, the younger son commits a sin -- he asks for and gets his inheritance early, in effect wishes his father is dead. The younger son goes far away, wastes the money, goes hungry, does things any good

Jewish boy would never do. But then he leaves behind his foolish ways and he returns to his father who joyously welcomes him and puts a new set of clothes on him. The Father calls for a feast. The older brother is invited to the party but refuses to come. The Father says “We had to celebrate and rejoice for this brother of yours was dead and now has come to life; he was lost and now is found.” The story ends with us not knowing whether the brother goes into the party or not.

If you and I had been Pharisees, listening to these stories of Jesus we would have asked ourselves: Is he talking about me? Is he saying I’m like the older brother? Is this rabbi saying that the sinners, the ones who knowingly disobey should be rewarded for their bad behavior? That I should be glad when these tax collectors can eat with him?

There’s a Jewish story about the good fortune that comes to a hard working farmer. The Lord appeared to this farmer and granted him three wishes, but with the condition that whatever the Lord did for the farmer would be given double to his neighbor. The farmer, scarcely believing his good fortune, wished for a hundred cattle. Immediately, he received a hundred cattle and he was overjoyed until he saw that his neighbor had two hundred. So he wished for a hundred acres of land and again he was filled with joy until he saw that his neighbor had two hundred acres of land. Rather than celebrating God’s goodness the farmer could not escape feeling jealous and slighted because his neighbor had received more than he. Finally, he stated this third wish: that God should strike him blind in one eye. {pause} And God wept.

Schadenfreude is that joy people get when they hear of the misfortunes of others. Here Jesus seems to be asking the Pharisees to embrace the opposite of schadenfreude: to feel joy at when sinners find redemption, forgiveness. Here’s the question Jesus is asking of the Pharisees, the religious insiders of his day: will you join my party? Jesus is messing with their ideas of the way things are meant to be; their sense of who is in, who is out. His radical, inclusive love was unsettling. The thought of celebrating God’s mercy shown to those who were on the outside was just too much. I wonder too: did they sense the power of God really was at work in Jesus? Did they rightfully sense that the power of this God would turn their world upside down? And that when God is in control, we are not.

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That was then. This is now. What is Jesus saying to us? Where are we in this story? Are we at the party? In a sense we are. There’s a Jesus party that happens here every Sunday morning. Sunday Worship is a celebration where we praise and thank God, we get together with our friends in faith, we sing, laugh, cry, share food in Communion or in coffee hour and we make connections with each other through God. Jesus welcome everyone and anyone to this party. We’re invited to a Jesus celebration where not every thinks like us, talks like us, looks like us. All invited to

this party are here because the long reach of God's mercy and grace extended to include us. – And in time you don't even notice the piercings that another guest at the party has; you don't stare at the tattoos that cover his neck... I want you to not even notice her jeans have holes..... You get past that you saw that that new family is the family sleeping in their car last week at the Wal-Mart The fact that another person is of a different race doesn't even occur to you..... that it doesn't matter that you're not sure is sure is that a woman or a man – their gender identity doesn't matter. And a couple is up in the balcony, two men or two women – and they are holding hands. And you still go over or hug them in the passing of the peace and invite them over to your house for dinner. no matter who they are that other person must be a friend of Jesus because that's how we all got here. By the grace of God. And that means in time any one of these people become your friend too.

Welcoming people who are different is something you as a church do pretty well. There's more we can learn and ways we can improve, but actually I believe you do that well right now including people of all kinds. In a few minutes Pat Bullard, chair of our Administrative Council is going to talk about a statement our church leadership team has adopted. It's a statement about welcoming all people. That's why I don't believe this statement – which was crafted by the Reconciling Ministries Team -- is going to be anything you can't or won't embrace after you consider it careful. Because you are a welcoming bunch of people.

The question I hear Jesus asking is not “are you coming to my party?” You're already here at the Jesus party. The question is not “are you going to be welcoming of all people?” I believe you are. The question I hear Jesus asking us is: Are you feeling the joy? There's a joy that comes from being a disciple of Jesus that you can't get anywhere else. It's the joy of being found – letting yourself be found by God just like when you played hide and seek as a kid. And the laughter that bubbled up when someone found you in your great hiding place. But instead of a game this is for real. And everything you ever longed for, dream about, hoped for in life is right here with you, handed to you as a gift by the one who has come looking for you. And the angels are rejoicing and God in heaven is rejoicing because you let yourself be found. You stopped moving away, stopped being so busy, afraid of God because you didn't want to lose control of your life. Because you rightfully sensed like the Pharisees, that Jesus would turn your life upside down. And suddenly letting go of whatever you had been clinging to seems like a good bargain in return for letting this hurricane force of God's radically inclusive love sweep over you. And it does and you find yourself refreshed, renewed, washed clean and it feels do wonderful. And today becomes your day to repent, to let God find you all over again. And you discover repenting isn't something that happens once and for all in your life but in fact its something we do right now and right now and right now and right now. In Luke 15:7 and 15:10 the story of the lost sheep and the lost coin both end with talk of joy in heaven when one

sinner repents. The very tense for repent is the present, not the past. Will you let yourself feel the joy right now of being part of the kingdom of God, all creation, animals plants, all people, all living things come alive in God?

We have so much good news today. Jesus is still asking questions; still making us think. Sometimes his questions make us uncomfortable but his questions always lead us somewhere. The long reach of God's love is holding us right now, completing in us all that is unfinished, smoothing over the ragged/jagged edges, mending all that is broken. God is rejoicing that in Christ we are choosing to be made whole. Who would have thought that evangelism would be so easy. It's nothing more than "saying yes" to coming to the Jesus party. And welcoming others into the joy of knowing they have been invited too!

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Draft of Welcoming Statement

Adopted by the Administrative Council of First UMC Baraboo, August 6, 2018

First United Methodist Church of Baraboo, WI welcomes all to share in the life, leadership, fellowship, worship, responsibilities, blessings and joys of our congregation as we seek to grow in faith, do all the good we can, and help others say YES! to God. As a Reconciling Congregation we affirm that each person is of sacred worth and created in God's image. We embrace the diversity of human nature, and celebrate the inherent uniqueness, potential and contributions of all persons, regardless of age, race, national origin, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status, family structure, economic status, and physical or mental ability. All are welcome, supported and included here. Many voices, many hands, and shared wisdom from varied perspectives and life experiences make us stronger and richer in thought, creativity, understanding and growth. We recognize that we hold a variety of opinions. We do not seek to erase our differences but to journey together in faith toward greater understanding and mutual respect.