Sunday September 12, 2004

DIVINE REJOICING

Luke 15:1-10

In the scripture reading today, Jesus told two short parables about something being lost.

An intense search takes place and what has been lost is found. In the first instance it is a sheep and in the second a coin. In each case when that which was lost is found, there is rejoicing.

You know the feeling. Is there anyone here or listening on the radio or watching on television who at one time or another has not lost something which to you had immense value? Then after a frantic search what was lost is found and you were not only relieved but delighted. And like the woman in

the story of the lost coin, you called together your friends and neighbors to celebrate with you.

About 20 years ago, one Saturday morning I was playing golf with my friends. Near the second tee box, I happened to look down at the grass and my eyes noticed a tiny sparkle. I bent down to look more closely and discovered a beautiful diamond ring. I turned the ring into the golf course pro shop and learned that it had been lost for several weeks. The woman who owned it had searched the golf course as best she could. She remembered taking the ring off and putting it in her golf bag before beginning her round several weeks earlier. She of course had no idea where on the golf course it might have fallen out of the bag. It was a stroke of

luck that I had found it. When one of the staff people in the pro shop telephoned her to tell her that the ring had been found, there was a lot of rejoicing. The ring's value was not only in its market price, but it had even greater value to her because it was a family heirloom.

Why did Jesus tell these stories about the lost being found at this point in his ministry? He told these stories because his critics were grumbling and complaining instead of rejoicing. Why? Because he was spending too much time with sinners and other people who were considered to be lost and not worth finding. He not only spent time with them, but he ate with them in their homes and to eat with

someone in that culture was to treat them as equals.

So Jesus told these self-righteous people some seemingly innocent stories about lost things: the lost sheep and the lost coin. These stories, of course, are mostly about God. And far from being innocent and cute, they are outrageous in what they tell you.

The outrage is underscored with an interesting literary twist. Jesus poses an ethical dilemma in the form of a rhetorical question. He said, "If any of you had a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will you do? Wouldn't you leave the ninety-nine in the field and go look for the one lost sheep

until you find it?" That's a fascinating question asked as if the answer were obvious. To some people, leaving the ninety-nine in the open field to seek the one who is lost doesn't seem like very good management. It's irresponsible. Why risk the ninety-nine to find only one.

Bible scholars have suggested all sorts of explanations. Some have said that a shepherd would provide for the safety of the ninety-nine before seeking the lost one. But Jesus did not say that. The point of the story is that God delights in finding the lost.

The second little story has as its central character a woman who has lost one of her ten coins. Another

rhetorical question: won't she light a lamp and sweep the floor until she finds it? Why not wait until morning when the light is better? What's the hurry? She still has nine coins. The point of both stories is that God will seek you by any means available until you are found. Both stories are about "Divine Rejoicing."

What's the additional message of these little stories for people today?

First of all, they portray a different image of God than many people have in mind. The shepherd and the woman are metaphors for God. These stories describe the seeking love of God which does not give up anyone for lost. God's love will

seek and search for the lost forever if necessary and God doesn't wait to start the search. Because the essence of the energy of God is love, love is unfulfilled without relationship. No matter how deep your hunger for God, God's hunger is deeper for you. No matter how much you feel estranged from God, God senses the estrangement even more.

Furthermore, God takes the initiative. God is not sitting back, impassive and imperial, waiting for you to come to your senses and come crawling back. God is searching through the brambles, down in the gullies, looking everywhere for where a sheep might get lost. God takes a spotlight and a broom and sweeps the house, looking in every nook and corner for the lost coin. I like the image of God with

a broom. In the sweeping, God searches but also cleanses. I like to think of God, broom in hand, patiently sweeping away the dirt from our lives and restoring us to our God-given image.

The coin didn't know it was lost. The sheep didn't know it was lost. This changes the order of things. The usual order is this—a person thinks or knows he or she is lost, the person repents and then is found and forgiven. These stories tell you that God is searching for you and trying to find you even before you are aware that you are lost.

So to repeat the first point again—the love of God as expressed in Jesus seeks all people, no matter how lost or how worthless or evil they might seem

to you. And this love of God never gives up until the lost are found. Jesus said over and over again, "I have come to seek and to save those who are lost."

Why does God do this? Because each human being is created in God's image and therefore has absolute worth in God's domain—even those people you might consider not worth looking for or trying to find because you think they have little worth or value.

Furthermore, the lost sheep and the lost coin are more than the prized possessions of their owners; they are also parts of a whole. The sheep belongs with the flock of 100. 99 is an complete flock. The

life of the lost sheep, the life of the flock and the life of the shepherd are all incomplete until the lost sheep is found. The woman had ten silver coins. The ten are not complete when one is lost. The search in each case is a quest for restoration and wholeness. In this sense, all of us are a part of God's creation and therefore you should be just as anxious as God until the lost are found and you are made whole again by their presence. The opposite is also true, the lost one does not feel whole until he or she is part of the group.

This is a hard lesson to learn. It's so difficult to believe that with God possibilities exist which you are unable to imagine; that even people you dislike or disagree with or you think are evil, are worthy of

God's love and that they are needed for your completion.

To make these stories even more contemporary, who are some of the lost in today's world? Who might you grumble or complain about if you knew Jesus was spending too much time with them? What about those who have AIDS? For some, these are modern day "lepers." Yet I'm convinced that Jesus would seek them out and accept them as having worth as children of God and expect you and me to do the same.

A second group of people that many consider lost are these who are in jail or prison. It's difficult to find volunteers to work with inmates and with those

who have been released after serving their sentence. Yet Jesus said in another of his parables that when you visit people in prison, it's the same as visiting him. "As you did it to one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it unto me."

A third category of individuals who some consider lost are those who are members of a church that is different from the one where you are a member. The divisions within the Christian family are unfortunate. Jesus was criticized for eating with sinners and outcasts. He invited everyone to eat at his table and he ate at theirs. The irony today is that there are those who would gladly eat a meal with you or me in our homes or in a restaurant but would not be able, according to some church

doctrine, to eat with you or me at the Lord's Table in this congregation and we would not be welcome at the Lord's Table in their church setting.

There are lots of lost people in this world. If you want to be completely honest about it, is there anyone here or who is listening who has not felt "lost" at one time or another? Whether or not someone else considered you lost, you felt lost within yourself. Perhaps you felt that your life had no clear direction, no purpose, that you were simply going through the motions of living without any meaning. Maybe you felt disconnected and therefore completely alone like the one lost sheep, or you were confused, perplexed, and that no one

cared about you; no one was searching for you, and no cared whether or not you were found.

Who are the lost in today's world? Each one of you at one time or another has been lost. You can be lost in so many ways. You can be lost in fear, anxiety and worry. You can get lost in your suffering. You can get lost in your drive to acquire more and more stuff.

You can get lost in your desire for revenge. You can get lost in your depression of grief because of the death of someone you loved. Whenever you are lost, you are incomplete. Your life is not whole until you are found.

There are those who are lost in an addiction to alcohol or drugs. You can be lost in defeat and disappointment. You can get lost by gradually wandering off course without being aware of it. A farmer was looking for a lost cow. A city man asked him how it got lost. The farmer said, "They nibble themselves lost. They keep their heads down, wander from one green tuft of pasture to another, come to a hole in the fence and never can find a hole by which to return to the pasture. They need someone to find them and lead them back."

Congregations like this one are to be seekers of the lost. We do this in a variety of ways.

We've had a radio ministry for more than 50 years to reach those beyond our building. About 17 years

ago, we added the television ministry. The letters we receive each week from people who have been spiritually fed through radio and television are amazing. The lost are being found.

Our Early Childhood weekday program, our Sunday Church School for children and adults, our Wednesday evening program for children, young people and adults, our choirs and our music programs, our Saturday evening and Sunday morning worship services, the Taize Service, our grief workshops, divorce recovery workshops—all of these are ways of seeking those who are lost. When the lost are found, Divine rejoicing is the result.

A vital church, an alive congregation is a seeking church—a church that is always reaching out beyond it own boundaries.

Notice especially what happens when you seek the lost and find them. Not only do you help that person discover again his or her true self so that life is more fulfilling, you find your true self as well, and incredible joy for everyone is the result. According to Jesus, as far as God is concerned, the last word is not sinning, or even self-denial, or getting lost, the last word is joy. The party begins when the lost are found. These parables tell you that when that takes place, joy is everywhere—there is joy in the presence of God, joy in the life of the one who has been found and there can be joy in your life. Amen.