

First Presbyterian Church, Cottonwood Falls, KS
Cause for Celebration: Luke 15
Rev. Pat Ireland, Pastor
Lent 4: March 18, 2007

First Lesson: Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³So he told them this parable: ⁴"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? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And 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.' ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸"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? ⁹When 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.' ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Second Lesson: Luke 15: 11-32

¹¹Then Jesus said: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² 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. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ 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! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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.' ²² 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. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes,

you killed the fatted calf for him!’³¹ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’³² 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.’ ”

This story is sometimes called the parable of the Prodigal Father, because his behavior is so outrageous, his grace so unmerited, it violates every social custom of the day. Yet, in parental love, we can forgive the father his indiscretion and empathize with his joy. Still, we know we are not the father in the story, we are one... or both of the sons and we do not always *want* to see others reconciled with themselves or God.

Let us Pray: Prodigal Father, guide the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts that we might join in the celebration with all the heavenly host. Amen

Jesus’ first two stories end with a statement about repentance. *But, when you think about it*, the idea of a sheep repenting is only slightly less absurd than the idea of a coin repenting!

That’s why scholar Richard Jensen, using the insights of Ken Bailey, suggests a new definition of repentance. The only possible action in those stories that could constitute repentance is the “finding of the lost.” Repentance is our acceptance of the reality *that we belong to God* and God has found *us* in Jesus Christ. This, of course means that we must acknowledge our own “lostness.” So, repentance may be defined as our acceptance of being found.

Even the younger son, who has come to his senses, and taken the initiative to return home, is dependent on the father’s willingness to “find” him. All prepared to be a hired hand, the father runs to him and restores his sonship. In contrast, the older brother appears to be unable to accept his own lostness and his estrangement from his father’s outrageous behavior. And even though his father assures him “that he already has it all,” he is in danger of getting of getting lost in the legalities of fairness and justice.

The sheep *belonged* to the shepherd. The coins *belonged* to the woman. Both sons *belonged* to the Father. Repentance is then, a restoration of that relationship. Repentance is knowing that we belong, not to ourselves, but to God. Repentance is more an experience of being found by a concerned seeker than the product of human effort. And its public sign is joy at the gift of new life.

Joy, is the emotion of repentance! *Joy* is the sign of the presence of God, the response to being found. Jesus’ question is: will we rejoice? These stories call the righteous to join in the celebration. Why? Because *no one* earns his or her salvation, *no one* deserves it. Celebration reveals whether we *understand* that our relationships are based on mercy rather than merit. If we find God’s mercy offensive we cannot celebrate. If we find God’s mercy offensive we are not really in relationship with the God of Grace, but some other God restricted to cultural or moral limitations. If we can’t celebrate *we are lost* and don’t even know it!

Cause for Celebration: Luke 15

In our Lenten study this week author, Michael Lindvall, suggested how the story would have gone if the older brother were to tell it. Let me share a part of *that* version.

“While he was yet at a distance, his father saw the younger son through the window of the house. But he remained seated at his writing table until his son was brought into him. Remaining seated, he greeted his son with grim countenance, crossing his arms before his breast. And the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” And the father said to his servants, “Quickly take him into the fields, and there he shall toil side by side with his faithful brother for forty days (at least) until he proves himself worthy to be a son of mine.”

“And after forty days, the elder brother came and drew near to the house, and his father ran and embraced him and kissed him. The elder brother said to his father, “This younger son of yours has grown somewhat in spirit during these forty days of hard labor in the fields.” And his father said to his older son, “Son, if you think your younger brother is truly repentant, I would desire to put the best robes on you both, and shoes on your feet, and rings on your hands. My son, let us bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us all make merry, for you have been so faithful, and your younger brother who was dead is alive and who was lost is found.” And the older son said, “Let me ponder the matter of such a banquet, father. Perhaps after another forty days.”

Mike and I were blessed to hear Tony Compolo speak at the Pastor’s Sabbath we attended two years ago. He’s a Baptist minister, who teaches sociology at Eastern College, just outside Philadelphia. Among others, he told this story about a time he was stuck overnight in Honolulu, waiting for an airline flight. He wasn’t on vacation; just passing through. It was 3:30 in the morning, he couldn’t sleep on account of the jetlag, and so he went out to a greasy-spoon diner down the street from his hotel (the only place that was open).

No sooner did Tony sit down at the counter and order his coffee and donut, than eight or nine boisterous, young (and not-so-young) women came in. They took every counter-stool in the place, except for his. Clearly, these women were regulars in the all-night diner. And clearly, they were what some call, rather delicately, “ladies of the evening.”

“It was a small place,” Tony says in one of his books, “...and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was loud and crude. I felt completely out of place and was just about to make my getaway when I overheard the woman sitting beside me say, “Tomorrow’s my birthday. I’m going to be 39.”

Another of the women spoke rudely to her: "What do you want from me, a birthday party or something?" and it came out that the first woman - her name was Agnes - had never had a birthday party in her life.

Tony waited, then, at the counter, until they'd all gone back out on the streets. He had an idea. (Ideas, you know, can be dangerous things.)

Tony asked the man behind the counter if the women came in often. 'Every night', the man replied, 'at 3:30, just like clockwork'. "Tomorrow night," Tony said, "let's throw Agnes a birthday party. I'll come by at 2:30 with a cake, and some decorations."

"No way," said Harry, the man behind the counter. "The birthday cake's my thing. I'll make the cake."

By 3:15 the next morning, as Tony tells it, "every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place." When Agnes and her friend came in at 3:30, everybody waiting screamed "Happy Birthday!"

"Never," he writes, "have I seen a person so flabbergasted... so stunned... so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter we all sang "Happy Birthday" to her. As we came to the end of our song... her eyes moistened. Then, when the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried.

Agnes, the tough, hard-bitten lady of the evening, didn't want to cut her cake. She said it was so beautiful, she'd like to take it home, and save it. Before anyone could say a thing, Agnes and her cake were out the door, with her promise to be right back.

As Tony continues his story, a stunned silence descended, then, on the diner. No one knew what to say to this crazy turn of events, so he broke the silence with the only thing he could think of, a practiced response for a minister. "What do you say we pray?" he said.

No one objected, so Tony offered up a brief prayer for Agnes.

"Hey!" said Harry, when the prayer was over. "You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?"

"I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning."

Based on the parable from Luke you and I have just heard, I'd say Jesus belongs to that church too. Then Tony asks a question: "If you were invited to this party for a prostitute, would you go ... and have fun?"

Are you up for one more story? Author Philip Yancy, in his book, "What's so Amazing about Grace" tells this story a young girl who grew up on a cherry orchard just north of Traverse City, Michigan.

Her parents tended to overreact to her nose ring, her music, and her dress. They had a huge argument and she got grounded. So... She ran away to Detroit, where she was befriended by a man driving the biggest car she'd ever seen. He gets her lunch, a place to stay and some pills to make her feel better than she's ever felt before. Now she knows: She was right all along: Her parents were keeping her from all the fun.

Sometime later, the man with the big car - she calls him "Boss"-teaches her a few things that men like. Sometimes, she thinks about the folks back home, but their lives now seem so boring that she can hardly believe she grew up there.

After a year the first signs of illness appear, and it amazes her how fast the boss turns mean and before she knows it she's out on the street. All the money she can make goes to support her habit.

When winter blows in she finds herself sleeping outside. "Sleeping" is the wrong word. A teenage girl at night in downtown Detroit can never relax her guard. Dark bands circle her eyes. Her cough worsens.

One night as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything about her life looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She feels like a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city.

Her pockets are empty and she's hungry. She needs a fix. She pulls her legs tight underneath her and shivers. Something jolts her memory and a single image fills her mind: May in Traverse City, when a million cherry trees bloom at once,

God, why did I leave, she says to herself, and pain stabs at her heart. She's sobbing, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three straight connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, "Dad, Mom, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a bus up your way, and it'll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well, I guess I'll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada."

It takes about seven hours for a bus to make all the stops between Detroit and Traverse City, and during that time she realizes the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? Shouldn't she have waited another day or so until she could talk

to them? And even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

Her thoughts bounce back and forth between those worries and the speech she is preparing for her father. "Dad, I'm sorry. I know I was wrong. It's not your fault; it's all mine. Dad, can you forgive me?" She says the words over and over, her throat tightening even as she rehearses them. She hasn't: apologized to anyone in years.

When the bus finally rolls into the station, the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all we have here."

Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect. Not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepare her for what she sees.

There, in bus terminal in Traverse City, Michigan, stands a group of forty--brothers and sisters and great-aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and great-grandmother to boot.

They're all wearing goofy party hats and blowing noise-makers, and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a computer-generated banner that reads "Welcome home!"

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her dad. She stares out through the tears in her eyes and begins the memorized speech, "Dad, I'm sorry. I know... "

He interrupts her. "Hush, child. We've got no time for that. No time for apologies right now. You'll be late for the party.

Yancy asks the questions: Are we willing to come home? Are we willing to get up in the middle of the night and welcome the lost one home!

*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

Excerpt from Brief Statement of Faith 1993

¹ In life and in death we belong to God.

⁴⁷⁻⁵¹ Loving us still, God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.

⁷²⁻⁷⁴ In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, ..."