

Great Joy in Finding©

Luke 15:1-10

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Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates

Today, we can't help but think about those who were lost in that terrible terrorism attack on September 11, 2001. The front cover of the bulletin this morning says it well: "We will never forget." Those of us who are old enough to remember that dreadful day, remember well exactly what we were doing and where we were. We know the stories of those who lost loved ones that day, a day when they were just going to work, getting started with the day, doing their ordinary things, traveling on a plane.

We also know the stories of those who survived and of the heroes who risked their own lives (and some even lost their own lives) for the sake of saving others. It was a horrible day – a time in our history that we will never forget. It was a time of great loss and for some, a time of rejoicing in those who were found alive.

Fred and I went to see the movie "Sully" yesterday. It is a great movie with Tom Hanks, that tells the story of how Captain Chesley Sullenberger landed US Airways Flight 1549 on the frigid Hudson River after birds destroyed both engines. There were 155 passengers onboard and not one was lost. There was great rejoicing that day for the many passengers and their families, once they knew they were safe.

I start with those events because sometimes, when I read, particularly, the last story in this text – the one about the woman losing the lost coin – I find it hard to grasp the great rejoicing that happens when she finds it.

I lose things all the time, and while it's frustrating and irritating and sometimes even a little scary – like losing a driver's license or some form of identity that could lead to all sorts of trouble – I don't think I've ever lost anything that caused so much joy in finding it that I called my friends, inviting them over to celebrate and rejoice with me in this great finding.

I do think the loss of a loved one or the realization that a loved one is okay – those examples are ones we can truly relate to. We know what it feels like to lose a loved one. And we know the relief and joy there is in finding that a loved one is okay.

Some of us know the worry of child who wanders off. My son, Darrick, was three, playing in the backyard of a friend whom I was visiting. The yard was fenced and his brother, Davey, who was turning 6 in a month, was playing there with him.

I was filled with fear when Davey came in to say that Darrick had gone through the gate and down the alley. I hurried out to find him, went to the alley myself, thinking Darrick would only be a few houses down. But he was nowhere to be seen. I started running in the direction Davey told me he had gone, frantically calling his name.

I came to a busy street, looked up and down those blocks but there was no sign of my little boy. I crossed the street and kept running and calling. Then, I crossed another street and was getting really frightened.

Then a man came out of a mechanic's garage and asked if the boy I was looking for had almost white, curly hair and was about this tall. I said yes, do you have him? He told me no, Darrick wouldn't come to him. (So much for not talking to strangers!) But about that time I could hear Darrick crying and calling "Mommy!" I found him just a little further down the alley, crouched behind a tree.

I have never been so afraid, or so full of great joy finding something lost. You can bet, I picked him up and carried him all the way back, comforting him, reassuring him that he was okay. And don't you know I rejoiced with my friend, and then again with my mom as I told her, and with my boys' dad when we got home that day. There was great rejoicing in finding the one who was lost. So much fear, and so much joy – both of which I can still feel today when I tell the story.

The coin that the woman lost must have been of great value to her. Jesus doesn't elaborate in this parable. He doesn't say whether or not she was a widow or if she had a husband. He does not tell us what the 10 coins were worth, but we can surmise that every one of those coins were needed for her to be able to get by.

If I had 10 pennies and lost one, I doubt that I would spend a lot of time and effort searching for that one penny. Although if 10 cents was all I had to live on for – say – 10 days, if I could find something to buy for a penny a day that would keep me from starving (which I can't imagine) then that one penny would be worth the search.

Of course, it gets more important if we raise the value of the coins. Maybe they were 10 silver dollars. Or maybe they were those coins from Jesus' day where each one is worth a day, or a week's salary.

The point is, this one coin was of great value to the woman. She needed that coin and so she burned the oil into the night, sweeping the floor, searching until she found it. And she was so relieved and so full of great joy that the next day she called her neighbors to come over and celebrate with her. There is great joy in finding that which is lost!

I really like the first story Jesus tells about the shepherd who has 100 sheep. He loses one lamb and so he goes searching, leaving the 99 together, behind, trusting they will be okay, taking the risk that they might not be – all for the sake of finding that one sheep. It is important to him to not even lose one. Each and every one is of great value to the shepherd.

A shepherd really had a dangerous job. When we hear the 23rd Psalm, we often think of pastoral scenes – lush, green fields and quiet, peaceful waters. But, sometimes it was difficult to find those green fields for the sheep to graze in. The land was rocky and there were cliffs

and all sorts of places where a sheep could fall off into a crevice and be lost. Not to mention the wild animals who would be hungry and looking for a vulnerable animal to have for dinner. That's why a shepherd had a rod and a staff. They could crawl down into those crevices and reach with their curved staff and pull a lamb to safety. They could use their rod for a club if need be to fight off a wild animal.

It's important to realize the emotions of what Jesus is talking about here – the deep feelings of losing something, or someone, and the great joy in finding that which was lost.

And we must remember the point of these parables. It all starts with a chorus of legalism. The Pharisees and the Scribes are grumbling. They are criticizing Jesus because so many tax collectors and sinners are coming to listen to Jesus speak. They don't think it's right for Jesus to welcome these people who, in their minds are despicable. He even sits down and eats at the table with them! Unheard of! They think Jesus should be more like they are. More particular about who he associates with.

And Jesus tells these stories ... stories of restoration, of return, of rejoicing in finding. These parables have been called the Parables of the Lost. But, they are also, very much, parables of great joy.

Jesus says there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. In just these 10 verses Jesus mentions joy and rejoicing five times. This is a joyful, good news story.

Who among us has never sinned, never turned away from God, never done something we had to ask for forgiveness for? Have you ever considered that *you* might have been the reason for a party in heaven?

You. You are loved and valued so much that no matter where your life has gone or what path you might have wandered off on – that wasn't where God was leading – all it took was for you to come back to the fold, or to admit your sin and ask for forgiveness. All it took was for you to be found by the one who never, ever gives up on you, never stops searching, never says, "Ach, that's just one out of millions. Who needs 'em?"

Never! He has never given up and He never will give up. You are that important to God.

I had a few suggestions from the men and women who studied this text last Wednesday. One suggested the simple title that says so much: *Acceptance*. Others offered *Lost and Found*, or, *Together We Are Found*, which tells it all.

One of the suggestions was interesting: *Are we part of the 99?*

I really can't tell you enough how much I like getting texts from those who are studying the same passage I am; those who are considering what the sermon might be about.

While I did not end up using any of those titles because I finally decided that what was most important was to magnify the great joy Jesus says there is in finding, I do appreciate each offering you give and really consider it all.

So if we are part of the 99 – meaning we are not lost, but have been found and are a part of the flock who already are safe in the fold – then don't we have a serious responsibility to learn the lesson Jesus is teaching the Pharisees and the Scribes?

We too, must look at each person who seems to have lost their way, with grace and love and mercy. Instead of judging, we welcome. Instead of distancing ourselves, we offer hospitality, remembering that each one is loved and of great value to God. And *they* might be the reason for celebration in heaven with the angels.

This rejoicing makes me think of worship – of how worship really ought to be. Doesn't it seem right for us – as those who are redeemed (the lost who have been found) to come together with great singing and rejoicing every time we hear the call to worship. Shouldn't our hymns of praise be loud and joyous, reflecting the celebration of heaven?

It makes me think of that joyful song we used to sing (at the top of our lungs) in Bible School:

I've got the joy joy joy joy
Down in my heart
Down in my heart down in my heart
I've got the joy joy joy joy
Down in my heart
Down in my heart to stay

Now I'm so happy, so very happy.
I've got the love of Jesus in my heart
Now I'm so happy, so very happy.
I've got the love of Jesus in my heart.¹

There is great joy in finding that which is lost. Thanks be to God for never giving up the search; for his love and great mercy and compassion which endures forever and ever.
Amen.

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¹ *Down in My Heart*, Words: Public Domain, Music: 2007 Fuseic Music Publishing (Admin. by Music Services, Inc.)
Songs of Razor and Tie .)