

“Joy in the House of God”  
September 12, 2010  
Luke 15:1-10 (11-32)  
Rev. Dr. Peter Shidemantle

I was sitting with an ecumenical group of clergy about a year ago – a group that used to meet together regularly – and we were having one of our better discussions. Though in some ways we aren’t very diverse – all guys, all white, all middle-aged or older – we are pretty diverse theologically. We were discussing one of the newer popular books on spirituality. It was being read and talked about by folks in our congregations, so we thought we would read it together. We found it an interesting book and could understand why it had so much appeal. We recognized the hunger that brought people to it, and to other books, philosophies and techniques that many people find helpful and enlightening. There is a genuine seeking spirit alive out there, and there is no lack of ways and methods in the marketplace that seek to feed that hunger. People are looking for a more meaningful life, searching for more purpose filled lives. We acknowledged that was so. That’s what we’re seeing. The conversation waned, and no one said anything for a couple of minutes – and I thought of a question and said it: “Do we need to be saved?”

A lot of people were gathered around Jesus, and somebody asked him, “What is God like?” As he so often did, Jesus responded by telling a series of stories:

“Which one of you shepherds,” Jesus asked, “has lost a sheep? Would you not leave the ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness and go beat the bushes for that one lost sheep? And when you find that lost sheep, which one of you would not put that sheep on your shoulders and take the sheep back to your friends and say, ‘Come, party with me. I found my lost sheep!’”

“Which one of you women, if you lose a coin, would you not rip all the carpet up off the floor of your home and move all the heavy appliances out in the yard, move all the furniture out on the porch? And when you have found that lost coin, which one of you would not run out into the street and say to your neighbors, ‘Come, party with me. I found my lost quarter!’ Now, which one of you would not do that?”

Well, the answer of course is that none of us would do that! That’s crazy! And then Jesus, the teller of these stories says, “These are not stories about you and the way you behave. These are stories about the way God behaves. God is the seeking shepherd. God is the searching woman.”

What kind of God is that? The God that we seek is more elusive than that, more distant – up there, out there somewhere. The truly seeking and searching person, someone who is truly interested in spirituality will explore and experiment, look for the ways to get in touch with this elusive god, so that we can find that meaning and purpose we seek, that peace and awareness. Well, Jesus speaks of a God who seeks and searches and finds.

Remember the context of these stories. They said to Jesus, “Why do you always hang out with sinners? You’re always eating and drinking with them. What kind of religious person are you? After all, what’s the point of religion except to separate out people: the sinful from the righteous? What are you doing with these sinners?”

In response Jesus says, “I came to seek and to save the lost.” That’s a very different view of God and a very different view of ourselves. When most of us “God interested” people are thinking about ourselves we’ll say things like, “Well, you see, I’m searching for something” or “I’m here because I’m looking for God,” and that’s fine. But that’s not the way the Bible usually tells it. In the Bible we’re usually looking for any way to get away from God and God is the one who is looking for a way to get to us. As Christians we believe that Jesus Christ is God’s supreme act of coming close to us, of seeking and searching us out until God finds us.

Will Willimon tells of how Annie Dillard, the great American writer, tells in her book about growing up in Pittsburgh. By the age of fifteen she had read through most of the books in the Carnegie Branch of the Pittsburgh Library near her home. After reading those books she decided that all this religion stuff is bunk and God doesn’t really exist. So she took it upon herself at age fifteen to show up at Shadyside Presbyterian Church and she said to her aging pastor, “I want my name off the roll. I don’t believe in God anymore.”

The pastor said, “Okay.”

Annie Dillard said, “You’re not going to try to argue me out of it?”

And he said, “No, no, no. You’re too smart for me. There’s no way I could argue you back in.”

So she said, “I want my name off the roll.”

He said, “It’s off the roll.”

She said, “Okay.

She walked out of the minister’s office and on her way down the hall she heard him mutter to himself out loud, “She’ll be back!” She wheeled around, went back into the office and she said, “What did I hear you say?”

He said, “Oh, I said I presumed that you’ll probably be back.”

And she said, “Look, this is my life. I live my life like I want to live my life. I’m not coming back!”

Well, Annie Dillard wrote in her life story, “As I write this I’m 48 years old and I’m back.”

*(As told in “God on the Prowl,” 30 Good Minutes)*

When we’re telling the story of us and God, we’ve got to talk not about the god we’ve found but about the God who came to us in Jesus Christ. God doesn’t leave it all up to us, and it isn’t over between us and God until God says it’s over. God doesn’t set the bar and tell us to see if we can pull ourselves up to it. No, God is the one that seeks and searches and finds. In our reading this morning Jesus says that “if just one of these sinners gets caught in the great dragnet of God’s grace, heaven just goes crazy.” (Willimon) Thank God it isn’t all up to us. Not only do we have a God that loves us as we are, but a God who seeks us out where we are.

It wasn’t just the “sinners” who were lost and needed to be found, but the good folks too. The problem they were having was a problem with joy. In the gospels we often see this characterized in the Pharisees, a very respected party of Judaism. But they’ve tended to get a bum rap. They were people of strong faith, loyal in their worship and prayer, generous to the poor, students and even masters of the scripture. In fact, as Tom Long points out, “someone has observed that our churches would probably be a lot stronger if we had some more Pharisees in them.” But they had a problem with joy, as Luke tells it, especially the kind of joy that Jesus was about – eating and drinking with sinners, hanging out with prostitutes and tax collectors.

There are lots of folks, and you and I know some of them, who stay away from church because what they experience there does not make them glad in their hearts – as the psalmist says, “I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord.” When the psalmist says this, he’s not just talking about going to church, about going to the sanctuary and participating in worship. He’s talking about the whole fabric of faith. The house of God isn’t just a building. It is wherever God and people meet.

Tom Long shares an old Jewish story about two brothers who were in the flour milling business. One of the brothers was married and had children, the other was single. They were equal partners in the business, and they made an agreement that at the end of each day, they would take any extra flour that had been milled and divide it into equal shares, and each brother would take his share home and put it in his storehouse. But one day the single brother began to think, “Here I am, unmarried with only myself to care for and my brother has a wife to support and children to feed. It isn’t fair to divide the flour evenly. My brother should have more of the

flour.” So that night, he took some of the flour out of his own storehouse and so as not to embarrass his brother, he went under the cover of darkness to his brother’s storehouse and secretly left the flour.

It just so happened that at that very same time, the other brother began to think, “Here I am with the richness of a family. I have a wife. I have children, and my brother has no one to take care for him when he gets old. It’s not fair to divide the flour evenly. My brother should get more, so he took some of his flour and under the cover of darkness, slipped it into his brother’s storehouse. Every night, unbeknownst to the other, each brother did this, always amazed the next day by the mystery that somehow the level of flour in their storehouses never seemed to diminish. Until one night, their arms laden with sacks of flour, they met each other in the darkness and realized what had been happening all along. With tears of loving joy, the two brothers embraced there in the darkness. According to the old tale, when God saw this, he touched that spot on the earth and said, “This is where I will build my house. For my house must always be a place of great joy.”

*(As told by Tom Long, “Is There Joy in God’s House?”)*

This is what Jesus was saying in his parables – wherever God is, there is great joy in the house. It is a place of great joy because it is there that people discover that what matters in life is not what they attain, achieve or acquire, but the grace they are given – not how high we can pull ourselves up, but how deeply God loves us. How sad and strange it is that so many committed Christians, including those who go to church regularly, stay outside the house of joy. God is like that shepherd who rejoices in finding the lost sheep, the woman who has a party over finding the lost coin. God is like that father who welcomes the wayward son home with music and dancing, and with the older son, the one who remained faithful and yet could not share in the joy and his father said to him, “Son, you are always with me. Always. Everything I have is yours. Everything. There has always been a joyful party going on for you in my heart and you did not know it. Come into the house, the house of joy.”

Part of what this is saying to us is that we will never really experience the joy of our faith until we recognize that we are all outsiders – that we are all in need of being saved – and that we’ve been invited into the party through no merit of our own. Whether we’re like the younger son who wasted his life, or the older brother who worked hard and smoldered with resentment because things are hard and responsibilities are heavy, and life isn’t fair – the fact is, all of us are on the outside – and it is God who invites us into the place of joy.

(One more story Tom Long shares.)

“A woman was reminiscing about her father. She said that when she was young, she was very close to her father. The time she experienced this closeness the most was when they would have big family gatherings with all their aunts and uncles and cousins. At some point, someone would pull out the old record player and put on polka records, and the family would dance. Eventually someone would put on the ‘Beer Barrel Polka;’ and when the music of ‘Beer Barrel Polka’ played, her father would come up to her, tap her on the shoulder and say, ‘I believe this is our dance,’ and they would dance. One time, though, when she was a teenager and in one of those teenaged moods and the ‘Beer Barrel Polka’ began to play and her father tapped her on the shoulder and said, ‘I believe this is our dance,’ she snapped at him, ‘Don’t touch me! Leave me alone!’ And her father turned away and never asked her to dance again.

‘Our relationship was difficult all through my teen years,’ she wrote. ‘When I would come home late from a date, my father would be sitting there in his chair, half asleep, wearing an old bathrobe, and I would snarl at him, ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ He would look at me with sad eyes and say, ‘I was just waiting on you.’

‘When I went away to college,’ the woman wrote, ‘I was so glad to get out of his house and away from him and for years I never communicated with him, but as I grew older, I began to miss him. One day I decided to go to the next family gathering, and when I was there, somebody put on the ‘Beer Barrel Polka.’ I drew a deep breath, walked over to my father, tapped him on the shoulder and said, ‘I believe this is our dance.’ He turned toward me and said, ‘I’ve been waiting on you.’”

We have not an elusive God who is hidden from us, but are told in these stories of the seeking shepherd and the searching woman and the waiting father of the God who is standing at the center of our life, the God who says to us, “Everything I have is yours. All that I am is for you, and I’ve been waiting for you. Come, share my joy.”

Halleluiah!

Amen.