

Rejoice with Me

Luke 15:1-10

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The Community Church of Sebastopol, United Church of Christ
September 11, 2016 – Ministry Launch Sunday

I.

“Rejoice with me,” we hear in the scripture today.

“Rejoice with me,” says the shepherd who seeks out and finds the one lost sheep.

“Rejoice with me,” says the woman who loses a silver coin and finds it.

“Rejoice with me,” is our message on this Sunday when we launch our ministry for the coming program year.

There is an odd dissonance on this Launch Sunday which also shares the inauspicious date of September the 11th.

We are tempted on this day to sing along with Green Day, “Wake me up when September ends.”

We are equally inclined to sing along with the writer of that ancient psalm reprised in Godspell, “How can we sing, sing the Lord’s song, in a foreign land?”

And yet for the church each and every Sunday is a little Easter, a weekly opportunity to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and therefore the restoration of the world.

Did you know that by simply showing up on Sunday, you witness with your body that death and fear do not and will not have the final word because God raised our Lord Jesus from the dead and pronounced that the final word is life, and life abundant, not only for us, but for all creation. And so, rejoice we must.

Rejoice with our children and their Sunday School teachers who are stepping into a whole new year to discover the Christian faith and build relationships.

Rejoice with our choral singers and musicians as they compose and rehearse music that will move the people during worship this year.

Rejoice with our teenagers who intuitively know how to create authentic community, experimenting with a life lived in the way of Jesus.

Rejoice with our Bible Studies and Women’s Fellowship and Committees which really are little communities carrying out the work of the church.

Rejoice with me, your new pastor, for I do not come to this work because it was the best thing I could think to do with my life, because it was an easy way to make a lot of money, rejoice with me because God calls all of us to the costs and joys of ministry.

Rejoice with me.

Rejoice with me because this community, which it is our privilege to steward with our time and our money, is a community that saves lives.

Rejoice with me because Christ's work here saves isolated people from desperate loneliness.

Rejoice with me because Christ's work here saves stressed out parents from having to figure it all out by themselves.

Rejoice with me because grieving people find a community to help bear the grief while continuing to praise the living God.

Rejoice with me because addicts of many kinds find communities of recovery and support along the way.

Rejoice with me because those with very few resources find a safe place to eat and rest and even shower.

Rejoice with me because pies get made and children go to camp.

Rejoice with me because songs get rehearsed, powerful music that cracks open closed hearts.

Rejoice with me because grandchildren and grandparents alike know they are central to the life of the church.

Rejoice with me because a teenager who doesn't quite fit in at school fits in here.

Rejoice with me because long-time members and brand new folks find fellowship here that is both familiar and forever changing.

Rejoice with me, church, rejoice with me.

Touch your neighbor and say neighbor, o neighbor, what we thought was lost, has in fact been found. Rejoice with me, church, alleluia.

II.

In today's Gospel story, Jesus is in trouble again.

You know that about Jesus, don't you? That he is a trouble-maker.

In the 14th chapter of Luke, Jesus is in trouble because the people who know and keep the rules are watching him closely. And he's breaking the rules.

Now in the 15th chapter, he's in trouble not because of anything new that he does, but because all the wrong people are coming to listen him.

In the Gospel, all the wrong people are described like this: "tax collectors and sinners."

Tax collectors were the wrong people because they were despised by the Jewish people. Tax collectors were considered collaborators with the Roman occupiers. They were considered corrupt and crooked, using their position to rip off their own people. The tax collectors today could be hedge fund managers, prosperity gospel preachers, payday loan brokers, and that guy who bought the patent to a crucial drug and then cranked up the price to make a profit.

Those people were coming to listen to Jesus.

And the sinners also came. "Sinners" referred to anybody thought of as unclean and therefore unacceptable to those considered clean.

Modern day "sinners" could be raging drunks with urine-stained pants, transgender people who defy the usual gender categories, a young person with painful looking tats and piercings all over their body, and the very elderly who just wishes people would let them die.

Those people were coming to listen to Jesus, tax collectors and sinners.

And the scribes and Pharisees didn't like it, no, not one bit.

Lest you think I'm going to start dissing on the scribes and Pharisees, let me just suggest that 2000 years ago I would have been a scribe, an educated person whose vocation it was to make sure that the tradition could be passed on.

And let me suggest, further, that those of us gathered here on a Sunday morning in Sebastopol, California, in a church that is largely white and privileged, we are, by and large, the Pharisees of the modern day.

Like the Pharisees, we're here because we still hold some value for our religious tradition and we want to see it continue.

We tend to think and to say that we are open and affirming to all but, truth be told, if too many tax collectors and sinners started showing up in church, it would raise our hackles and cause us to wonder what's going on.

III.

And that's exactly what happened on that day retold in Luke 15.

Too many tax collectors and sinners showed up for church.

And the scribes and the Pharisees, instead of losing their cool, did what all polite and correct church people when they don't like something: they grumbled.

In response to their grumbling, Jesus told a few brief, evocative stories.

In the first, a shepherd with 100 sheep loses one of them.

He leaves 99 of his sheep to find the one that was lost.

When he finds the lost sheep, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

He goes home with it and gathers his friends and neighbors.

"Rejoice with me," he says to them, "for I have found my sheep which was lost."

We might wonder at this story.

Wasn't it a bit reckless and imprudent to leave 99 sheep when one goes missing?

And we might marvel at the answer to that question: Yes it was.

In the second story, a woman loses one of ten silver coins.

She lights a lamp and sweeps the house to find it.

When she finds it, she calls to together her friends and neighbors.

“Rejoice with me,” she says to them, “for I had found the coin that I had lost.”

And we might wonder at *this* story.

Did Jesus just compare God to a woman doing housework? Yes, he did.

And wouldn't a party for her friends and neighbors potentially cost more than the value of the silver coin itself. Yes, it would.

And for whose benefit are these parables told?

Conventional wisdom suggests that they are told to comfort the lost.

But that's not the context.

Jesus told these parables for the benefit of those who already consider themselves to be found, those who know the rules, those who more or less have their lives together. Here's the clue in the text: Jesus begins his string of parables addressing with scribes and Pharisees with the words, “Which one of you...?”

In other words, the purpose of these parables is to get those of us who already belong to the church, those of us who see ourselves as living basically moral lives, those of us with privilege, to empathize with a God who is sucker for one lost sheep and for the one coin in ten that rolls under the dresser.

The God whom we glimpse in the life and ministry of Jesus, in his death and resurrection, in the continuing life of his Holy Spirit, even now at loose in the world, is a God of prodigal, profligate, risky, and audacious love.

It is a love that astounds and offends, that seeks out and finds that which the world would rather forget.

And our response to that love, what should it look like?

IV.

It should look like rejoicing.

Rejoicing looks like adults and children singing about the joy of new life in Christ.

Rejoicing looks like friends surrounding someone who recently lost their lifelong love.

Rejoicing looks like a first-time visitor receiving a welcome they did not think was possible.

Rejoicing looks like a young person being greeted by name by a person other than their parent.

Rejoicing looks like voices raised in song, like trees clapping their hands, like words of comfort and encouragement, like the church willing to risk its very existence in order to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

Rejoice with me, our God says, rejoice with me. I have found what was lost. Rejoice with me. Let's have a party. Rejoice with me. Today and in all the days God gives us. Amen.