

It's Time to Party  
Luke 15:1-10  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
September 11, 2022  
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Would you really leave 99 to search for 1? What if you came back to discover that while you were finding the 1, 5 or 6 others have wandered off?

And while we all know the joy of finding some loose coins in the couch cushions or reaching into a coat pocket at the beginning of the winter to discover a forgotten \$20 bill, is that something over which we would throw a party? Would we really put on a \$100 spread for our neighbors to celebrate the \$20 we found?

If we think of the stories in today's scripture in these terms, we are sure to miss the point.

Because today we hear Jesus speaking in parables. So, again, let's remember that parables are figurative language, they are stories with meaning well beyond what a literal reading of them would indicate. Just as we might say "it's raining cats and dogs" and not expect to see furry mammals falling from the sky, so those hearing Jesus knew that he was talking about so much more than sheep and so much more than coins.

In a world where the righteous spent too much energy controlling and criticizing those *they* deemed unrighteous - a world, perhaps, not too different from ours - Jesus spoke in parables and asked them to see people in a different light.

In a context where boundaries were put on the extent of God's love, again perhaps something we are too familiar with in overhearing the declarations of others - Jesus spoke in parables and reminded people of the wideness of God's mercy and the abundance of God's love.

Among a people who were used to being the seekers, those who knew their place and position, those who were in control and looking for that which they called lost - Jesus spoke in parables and reminded them that God is the great seeker and God is seeking after each of us.

So, here, in answer to the grumbling of the religious authorities, with a much larger and more diverse group of people looking on, Jesus tells these parables.

In one it is a rich person with many sheep...in another a poor person whose wealth could fit in the palm of her hands. But really the distinctions stop there. These parables parallel each other as the one who recognizes the loss takes great risk to find that which is lost...*and* as they celebrate, not just with personal joy, but with a party upon discovering that which they were seeking.

And, friends, if that is what God is like...which Jesus seems to say again and again is true...then aren't we who claim to love and worship God to do the same? Aren't we called to throw open the doors of welcome, to seek out those who need community, and to always be ready to throw a party?

A 2008 article in the *New York Times* about pubs in Oxford said, "a good pub is a ready made party, a home away from home, a club anyone can join" (Henry Shukman, "A Pub Crawl through the Centuries," *New York Times*, April 13, 2008; online: [www.travel.nytimes.com](http://www.travel.nytimes.com)).

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What if the same could be said of the church?

Unfortunately more people experience the judgment of the righteous rather than a sense of welcome and celebration. Unfortunately too often “good church people” put energy into identifying the lostness of others rather than even being able to talk about the ways they are lost or confused or misrepresenting the heart of God. Unfortunately for too long the public face of Christianity has been pointing a finger of judgment toward strangers and sinners.

But Jesus reminds us that there is a party we are invited to join...a party celebrating each and every one who God loves.

And, yes, this means the party is thrown to celebrate those who are separated from God in ways we might identify as sin. *And* this means the party is thrown to celebrate those who are separated from God in ways we might actually name as righteous. Because anything can separate us from God.

As Justo L. Gonzalez reminds us, “Despite all the bad press that Christians later gave them, the Pharisees and scribes were deeply religious people. They were very concerned with obeying God and all the religious laws of Israel. From their perspective it was those others, the tax collectors and sinners, who were lost. So the Pharisees and scribes would be unlikely to identify themselves with the lost sheep that the shepherd rescues...” [Lectionary column for March 31, Fourth Sunday in Lent \(christiancentury.org\)](http://christiancentury.org).

But Jesus told these parables with a mixed group of listeners and we can be sure that he hoped each one would hear an invitation to both welcome and be welcomed to a party celebrating God’s love for all.

So, church, how do these parables challenge us?

Are there moments when you feel lost and separated? Are there times when you are unsure about God’s presence, God’s love, or your need for community? If so, there is a party waiting for you *and* for all of God’s children.

Are there moments when you think you have it all together, when you are sure that you are right and good and that any problems are caused by someone else? If so, there is a party waiting for you *and* for those you might prefer to leave out.

And perhaps *our* biggest challenge as followers of Jesus, as a faith community committed to proclaiming that God’s love is abundant and that the welcome extends to all, perhaps our biggest challenge is to help Christianity shift its focus from saving the lost to celebrating God’s love for all. Perhaps our challenge is to remember to throw the party.

As G. Penny Nixon reminds us, “It is one thing to ‘save’ and another to ‘welcome.’ Religious insiders [and friends, for the most part that’s us] are often more comfortable with saving the lost than welcoming those whom they perceive to be lost. Saving is about power, whereas welcoming is about intimacy. Saving is primarily focused on the individual, whereas welcoming is focused on the community” (G. Penny Nixon, “Luke 15:1-10, Homiletical Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 71).

Today we here at First Christian celebrate “Welcome! Sunday” and we are doing so with festivities, with food and fun, with a party after worship. And, if we are listening to the parables, we will do so

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with great celebration of each one who shows up. We will do so with abundant welcome as we greet each friend and stranger knowing that we are better and more whole as a community because of every person who is part of us. We will do so not from a place of power, welcoming others to *our* party, but from a place of intimacy and invitation engaging in real relationships with God and all of God's children.

And these parables aren't really just for today...they aren't just about the one Sunday of the year when there are tents on the front lawn. But they are an invitation to keep the party going...to remember that we are always welcomed and wanted *and* to remember that everyone else is, too.

"Properly understood, then, the church isn't primarily a circle of moral excellence and respectability. Rather, it's primarily a circle of joy, of celebration, of reveling in what the God of grace and mercy has done, is doing, and will yet do. Moral excellence has its place, of course, but it's decidedly in second place. What comes first is the party, the singing, the joy on earth as it is in heaven" ([Rejoice with Me: SALT's Commentary for Fourteenth Week after Pentecost \(saltproject.org\)](#)).

Friends, it's time to party! It's time to celebrate the welcome that God extends to all. It's time to rejoice over each one who is here and to throw the doors more widely open so that others may feel seen and loved and welcomed. It's time to dance and sing and rejoice - for ours is a God of wide and abundant love and we are called to be the same. Amen.