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1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

September 11, 2022

SOMETHING TO CELEBRATE

It is a story about one who is separated from the group and there is determined searching going on. It is a story that only the Gospel of Luke tells about Jesus when he was a young person. Every year while he was growing up, Jesus' family would make the trek from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. But one year, when Jesus was twelve-years-old, when it was time to head back home, the pre-teen missed the caravan heading back. Mary and Joseph were walking with a large group of people, and they assumed Jesus was somewhere in the group, but at the end of the first day of walking, they realized he was not with them. They went back to Jerusalem to search for him. In a time of limited communication, it took three days of searching in order for them to find him. They found him in the temple among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. But Mary said, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." Then, even though it isn't mentioned, I have to imagine that Mary gave her son a big hug. Perhaps that experience of being the one searched for led to parables Jesus would tell later in his ministry.

However, that story got me to wondering what other things Mary might have said to Jesus as he was being raised. I can imagine Mary uttering certain 'Mom sayings.' "Jesus, close the door; you weren't born in a barn – oops, I guess I'll have to let that one slide." Or I can envision her saying: "Go ask your father – no, wait, get off your knees, I meant for you to ask Joseph!" And if Mary ever told him, "Don't hang around with the wrong crowd," then we could say Jesus didn't always follow his mother's instructions.

At the beginning of our gospel text this morning, we hear that tax collectors and sinners were coming to hear Jesus teach. But he didn't just present his empowered point and send them on their way. Rather, Jesus welcomed the sinners and ate with them. We are also told that Pharisees and scribes did follow their mothers' advice

to not hang around with the wrong crowd. However, they didn't quite follow the other mothers' dictum, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." For they were criticizing Jesus for the shoddy company he kept. There is no detail in the description of who these 'sinners' were that were hanging out with Jesus, but we've all known certain ne'er-do-wells that could have been referred to by such a name. The scorn for those who were called tax collectors is something we know more about. These weren't people who simply worked for the IRS with power to audit tax returns. Instead, these were those who collaborated with the enemy Roman power that occupied the land, collecting taxes to pay for the very oppressive force that kept its boot on the necks of the Jews. In addition to that seemingly treasonous activity, they were also known for collecting extra taxes in order to enrich themselves. If you are known by the company you keep, then Jesus' name would be mud for welcoming and having a dinner party with such as that. Some would say that Jesus' failure to observe appropriate distinctions between those who were on the up and up and those who weren't, could prove to be destructive to the moral fiber of the community.

In response to the grumbling by the Pharisees and scribes to the type of company he was keeping, Jesus told the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the additional parable that wasn't read this morning about the lost sons, sometimes called "the prodigal son." There was some precedent for the first story. Similar imagery is found in the Hebrew scriptures about a shepherd-like God going after a lost sheep that could have been called Israel. But Jesus' version has the shepherd leaving ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to go after even one that is lost. This shepherd keeps looking high and low, far and wide until the lost one is found. The diligent shepherd then carries the sheep on his shoulders back to where it belongs, but the story isn't over until a gathering can also be organized to get neighbors and friends to join a celebration for the sheep that had been found.

Jesus then pairs this story with something more provocative, where the God figure is a woman who is looking for a lost coin. Those who challenged Jesus were quite invested in the religious understanding of who was 'in' and who was 'out.' They would have struggled mightily with the God Jesus described - One who would not be contained by their sense of correctness or propriety. In both stories, take note

that the lost one has no capacity to show repentance for getting lost. The woman takes the full initiative to search for and find the coin, whose value to her seems to go far beyond face-value. Then it sounds even stranger than when the shepherd did it, but the woman calls together her friends and neighbors to get them to join in a grand celebration for the coin having been found. After each story is a line mentioning the greater joy in heaven over a sinner who repents than over a righteous person doing what is right. So, there is mention of repentance, but it doesn't sound like it comes until the sinner has been welcomed and has the opportunity to experience the sense of supportive community that had not been a previous part of lived experience.

Even the Apostle Paul, as we heard in what he wrote, acknowledged that God took the initiative to turn his life around. He thought he was a righteous religious leader who was trying to put down a new aberration of the faith. His zeal was such that he was ready to even use violence against the earliest followers of Christ. But instead, God showed him how lost he had gotten, and carried him into the midst of a caring Christian community in Damascus that he had planned to persecute. Even with trepidations about ministering to one who had been their enemy, the congregation did so in such a way that this one who described himself later as the foremost of sinners, was transformed. It would not be long until God would use Paul in mighty ways to strengthen the ministry and outreach of the early church. We can be thankful that those who were not only tolerant of Paul, but who even celebrated his presence, were not worried that they would be known by the company they kept. Instead, they rejoiced that they were known by the One above who kept them.

Thinking about the parables again, I have generally thought of the lost sheep or coin as representing the unchurched or unbelieving, the atheists and naysayers. However, the lost sheep belongs to the shepherd's flock at the beginning of the story. It is one of his own. The coin belongs to the woman before she loses it. It is one of her own. Think for a moment about the ways you've wandered without even realizing it - the ways you've lost your moorings and found yourself in strange, frightening lands with no markers to guide you home. Sometimes, we lose our sense of belonging. We lose our felt experience of God's presence. We lose our capacity to persevere. We lose the ability to discern right from wrong. Some of us

get lost when illness descends on our lives and God's goodness starts to look not-so-good. Some of us get lost when we experience the loss of a loved one leading to a crisis of faith. Some of us get lost in the throes of addiction, or anxiety, or lust, or unforgiveness, or prejudice, or apathy, or bitterness. Some of us get lost very close to home, perhaps within the very walls of the place of worship as the twelve-year-old Jesus did.

There's one more 'momism' that I'm wondering whether Mary at some point taught her son - "One good turn deserves another." The searching shepherd, the searching woman, the searching God did a good turn by finding and celebrating some who were lost. If we are to follow the saying, God's good turn calls for another good turn. A turn toward the good is actually the core of the meaning of the word, repent. God searches for us in however we experience a sense of lostness, searching and searching until we are found and carried to where we belong, where we can be celebrated for having been found, where we can, by God's grace, make that good turn for the better. This is that place, where even when we have ignored what our good momma taught us, that we can be brought back and it feels like we are received with a mom's embrace. That sense that God will search for us and find us and celebrate us in doing so, is definitely something to celebrate on this Homecoming Sunday. Thanks be to our searching, finding, and celebrating God. Amen.