

Luke 15:1-10  
September 12, 2010

South Plains

### Setting Presbyterians Free

There's a news story making the rounds this week. It seems someone has studied the amount of time and gas spent by men, men who keep driving while they are lost, men refusing to ask for directions, men wasting time and gas. My question this morning for the men is this: Have you ever known anyone wasting time and gas because they were lost and refused to ask directions? I cannot imagine where they get this stuff.

The two parables Jesus tells us this morning are about being lost. In the first parable, one sheep out of 100 is lost. The shepherd leaves the 99 and goes in search of the single sheep. One of the emblems of Christianity is the good shepherd carrying the lost sheep home. I guess everyone has had the experience of getting lost in an unfamiliar place. Eventually we either get directions or we accidentally find our way. But, my second question concerns a more serious lostness: Have you ever been so seriously lost that you knew you would not find your way without help? I'm talking about that gut feeling of hopelessness when we accept the fact that we cannot find our way home. That second kind of lost is what Jesus is talking about in his parables. When we are really lost and we've run out of options, being found is an unimaginable relief, it's a cause for rejoicing because it's being set free of mistakes and sins, those

we've worried about today and those we've forgotten. That rejoicing is the climax of both Jesus' parables.

Rejoicing is something we Presbyterians need to re-learn periodically. Maybe all people need a refresher course from time to time in how to rejoice, or at least more practice. These two little parables offer some help. In both stories there's a problem, an animal or a coin is lost. I know very little about sheep, but I'm told they need a lot of help. Separated from their flock, they're in trouble. No farmer wants to lose an animal. Somebody's got to go looking for them.

The lost coin requires a little more background. The footnote in my Bible says it was worth a day's wage, not an insignificant amount. Some Middle Eastern women wear a string of coins around their forehead, not only for decoration. The coins are their dowry; the money that goes to the bridegroom, the money that belongs to the woman, her self-worth in ancient patriarchal cultures is on display. Losing one's dowry is comparable to losing one's retirement, your future security. No wonder the woman rejoices when she finds the coin.

In both parables, the finder shares the joy with friends. Shared good news doubles and triples the rejoicing. I've noticed that when I can't share my joy with anyone, pretty soon it begins to fade. It doesn't go away completely, but it can't color my whole day and change my perspective on life unless I tell somebody, and unless

they can be happy with me. That's why watching a football game or going to the movies is better when we can do it with another person who reflects and amplifies and elaborates our pleasure.

That's why heaven needs so many people up there, people we love. Jesus says there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. The angels together with all God's people are cheering us on when we repent, when we turn around from going in the wrong direction and start in the right direction.

Everybody knows that is true for the recovering alcoholic, the addict going straight for one more day, and the transient who finds and holds a job. But, it's also true for the spouse who searches until he or she finds a reason to love the person on the other side of the bed. It's true for the battered wife who turns away from the danger and leaves the marriage. It's true for the young person who recognizes the emptiness of depression and gets help. It's true for the searcher, the confused, the disoriented, the guilty who are invited to an occasion as simple as Sunday morning worship and who learn that God has been waiting, waiting to give them peace and direction.

The parables are about the joy of being found by God. Jesus is explaining to the grumbling Pharisees and to us why he welcomes sinners and eats with tax collectors. Jesus is searching out the very people who

have lost their way morally and spiritually. These are not only the good, stable people of Galilee. Jesus is spending his time with people who are morally reprehensible in their behavior. We know that Jesus ate at the home of Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector who was infamous for skimming tax revenues to feather his own nest. I suppose today, Jesus would be eating with senators and members of congress. There is also the possibility that Jesus himself has hosted a meal and invited these sinners and tax collectors who Luke says "were coming near to listen to him (15:1)."

Table manners were not just good etiquette for the Jews in Jesus' time nor are they in our day. Table fellowship meant acceptance: I accept your hospitality as a brother or sister; I extend my hospitality as an obligation to look after your welfare as I would a member of my own family. This is risky business for Jesus; and it's still risky for the church that follows Jesus' example. Risky but rewarding.

South Plains will rejoice when we move into Kirk Hall, but that will not be the joy Jesus is talking about unless one new Christian moves in with us. We will rejoice at the end of stewardship season when we have pledged to support a new and bigger budget, but that's not Jesus' real joy unless one person turns away from an unhealthy expense in order to give to Christ's work. We will rejoice at the birth of our Savior this Christmas, but that will be a pale joy unless Jesus finds one more person to welcome into his world. The real rejoicing for

South Plains will not be when we move into Kirk Hall as happy as that day will be in our 191 years. The real rejoicing will be every time a brother or sister eating a meal in Kirk Hall is found by God.

I think I know why heaven rejoices so much more when one sinner repents than when 99 righteous Presbyterians sing hymns and fill the offering plates.

A couple I know were both teaching as college professors when one Thanksgiving they decided to invite some friends to celebrate the holiday. They both knew several colleagues with little or no family nearby, so they invited a few women who were recently widowed or divorced, men recently divorced or out of work, all lonely souls. Intentionally or not, they really invited the lost. It was a memorable Thanksgiving because it was a complete disaster. The guests fought with each other and drank so much that at the end of the evening the host and hostess had to take them home in separate cars. True story.

My friends were not prepared. That kind of service and evangelism is hard work for individual Christians and for the church. As often as not, the invitation is either refused outright, or the hospitality falls flat as it did for my friends. When someone responds it means that heaven has been working overtime. The Holy Spirit has plowed the ground, planted the seed, pulled the weeds, and poured water from the sprinkling

can in order to get that seed to germinate and grow and bear fruit.

The very best rejoicing happens when something good happens at the end of a lot of hard work, when we share our happiness, and when all the host of heaven join Father, Son and Holy Spirit in joy.

Every year the Presbyterian calendar designates Evangelism Sunday. This year September 26 is Evangelism Sunday. We are never quite sure how to celebrate that day. It's a little presumptuous to think we can program repentance or even to program rejoicing with heaven. Surely a first step toward evangelism would be to liberate ourselves from the fear of that word "evangelism." It means good news. It means happiness in heaven and on earth, good news that liberates us.

The repentance Jesus is talking about when he tells these parables goes to the root of that word. To repent in the deepest sense is to re-think our lives. To feel our lives turning around, being changed, being transformed from an old way of thinking and living to a new and better way of life. Some folks want a one-time repentance, a single pill that cures all our ills forever. One of the virtues of Presbyterian worship is recognizing that repentance needs to happen over and over again. We all need it. It's not just the sinners and tax collectors who need to listen to Jesus, it's the Pharisees and the Presbyterians and the very best of Christians.

When we repent, when God turns us, there is joy, untrammelled rejoicing let loose in heaven. And, sometimes a little seeps down to earth on Sunday morning. The truth is that all of us have wasted a little time and gas (all right maybe more than a little) driving around when we're lost. The only thing worse than wasting that time and gas is not knowing that we are lost and need help. That's the opposite of joy. That's real sadness. I'm convinced that whatever we do with Evangelism Sunday, the rejoicing depends upon our repentance first. That's the joy we can feel. That's the joy we share with heaven.