



Let's Get the Party Started

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church

Luke 15:1-10

The Rev. Dr. Joy Moore is a homiletics professor at Luther Seminary here in St. Paul. She told the story of recently having been driving on a highway in Pennsylvania and getting lost. Because she was lost, she happened to see a sign to the memorial for 9/11's Flight 93, so she spontaneously decided to take the exit and go see the memorial which was in the field where the Flight 93 crashed. When Dr. Moore got to the memorial, she was surprised to see a new feature of it, completed in 2020. It is a beautiful structure called a [Tower of Voices](#), which is a 93-foot-tall musical instrument of 40 exquisitely designed wind chimes. Dr. Moore listened to the sound, which was breathtakingly beautiful. When she tried to record the sound on her phone, the phone could only pick up the sound of wind. But with human ears she heard a chorus of breathtaking music, all designed to honor the 40 passengers and crew who died bravely that day. She said that she came there thinking she was going to be in grief. But what she experienced in the midst of her grief was joy, the joy caused by the wind, the breath of God, and the lavish outpouring by humans honoring those who were lost.

There was nothing efficient about the outpouring of years and thought and resources that went into planning every tiny detail of the Tower of Voices, completed nearly 20 years after that terrible day in 2001. It was a lavish endeavor that we judged commensurate with the value of those lives and the enormity of their sacrifice. Just this week we have seen a similar outpouring of love and grief in the world honoring Queen Elizabeth after her remarkable seventy-year reign in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. And today, in the story from Luke's gospel, Jesus tells two parables about the lavish lengths to which God goes to seek out and find those whom Jesus calls not sinful but lost, and the party that happens when they are found. There are similarities and differences in the lavishness here. In the case of memorializing 9/11 and Queen Elizabeth, there is nothing we can do to bring back those we have lost. But in the case of Jesus' parables today, he is speaking about the lavish effort and celebration that are associated with people who had been lost being found again.

The traditional language used here is about sinners who repent. But in Luke's gospel, repentance is almost never about achieving some moral bar and making amends. It's about being restored to relationship, to a place of belonging, where a person had been estranged. It's about recovering the sense of belonging where there had been only separation from others and from oneself. In the economy of Jesus, this single purpose is worth any and all lavish expenditures. In fact it's the only thing that really matters: restoring all persons to full belonging to one another and to God.

So no wonder tax collectors and sinners were coming to hear him. That's the first detail I noticed in this scripture. Look at your bulletin, or maybe we can scroll back to the slide that shows the text of this scripture. The first sentence says, "All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus." How many people who are considered unfit, in a bad place, on a destructive trajectory do you know who would come listen to a religious teacher? But they were coming to listen to Jesus because he was saying something that meant something to them. No one ever comes to be shamed. He wasn't shaming them or saying everything they did was OK, either. He was holding out teachings and a way of life and liberation and love that could in a sense bring them back to themselves, could restore them to who they really were. So they flocked to him.

Today we are holding so many different things together, both somber and joyful—on the one hand, the memorial of 9/11 and the death of Queen Elizabeth, and on the other hand, the launch of the program year and return to school and the first day in nearly three years that masks are optional during this service. And on this day, it is good to remember what really matters. We are a community gathered for one simple reason: to follow Jesus' Way of Love together. In our culture, efficiency and productivity are valued. In Jesus' economy, it's worth every lavish effort imaginable to restore someone who has lost their way into belonging again. Now don't get me wrong. I don't believe Jesus is calling us into lavish codependency where we tie ourselves in knots to beat our heads against a wall trying to change someone who doesn't want to change. We can't change anyone. What we can do is hunt high and low for the spark of God's image in a person and in ourselves, and celebrate ferociously when we find it.

Jesus' Way of Love is counter-cultural, relentlessly affirming, joyful, utterly inefficient, and priceless. How much effort do you think it is worth to restore human beings to full belonging, to real community with one another and with God? Jesus' answer is, there is no limit to which God will not go to restore someone to belonging. And, when it does happen through the grace of God, this is worth celebrating with everything we are and have.

Perhaps there are parts of you, or other people, or whole groups of people, whom you think are irretrievably lost, beyond hope. Perhaps you think there is no way you can really belong anywhere. But stop for a moment and imagine a world in which everyone belongs. This doesn't mean that every behavior is acceptable. Far from it. But if our bottom line isn't a line in the sand separating us vs. them or good vs. bad, but a radical commitment to community and belonging, then what does that mean for the person who has seemingly passed the point of no return? Our baptismal covenants commit us to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. Perhaps there truly are some people who have so crossed over into selfishness and evil that it is impossible to find divine dignity in them, but I have never met such a person. For whatever reason, our culture seems so often to be stuck in accusation and blame, and I know I can spend too much time there myself. But in the kingdom of God, in the dream of Jesus, we are called to look for and strengthen those sparks of divinity and goodness that do exist in each other, and to celebrate ferociously when someone who has lost their way comes to themselves again.

This week, for those who feel so moved, let's practice a radical affirmation and belonging. Let's commit to lavish efforts seeking out goodness and the image of God in ourselves and one another, and then spending our attention there in joy, instead of staying mired in accusation or fault-finding. Let's enter into the joy of God, whom Jesus says will spare no effort to find you and bring you home. Welcome back. Welcome home. Let's get the party started. Amen.