

God Throws a Party

Following last week's text in chapter 13, Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus has been invited to eat a Sabbath meal at the home of a leader of the Pharisees. While this leader and others are keeping an eye on Jesus, Jesus takes notice of how the guests are jockeying for the best seats. He goes on to suggest that they should be vying for the lower seats and that the poor and the outcast should be on their guest lists instead of friends and family members who can return the favor. Is it any wonder that the Pharisees are grumbling at the beginning of chapter 15? The Pharisees as you may recall are charged with helping the community remain faithful and maintain their identity in a fraught and diverse world. Since the time of the divided kingdom and the Exile, the children of ancient Israel have been scattered far from the rhythms and rituals of the Temple in Jerusalem. It has been the Pharisees' calling to guide and teach and lead the people in following the Law and worshiping God. And Jesus seems determined to push them on everything. So yes, it makes sense that they grumble. They are upset that Jesus shares a table not only with them but also with "tax collectors and sinners." According to Dr. John Carroll, sinners are those who are "living outside the structure of faithful Torah observance."¹ The Pharisees grumble because Jesus stretches and even blurs their carefully maintained boundaries. They worry it seems about what will be lost while Jesus concerns himself with *who* is lost now, the very ones God hopes to find. [Read Luke 15:11-32]

A few months ago, I read an article exploring the best ways to find lost things. The writer, Malaka Gharib had recently spent hours turning her home upside down looking for her missing passport. She was immensely relieved when she found it wedged between her mattress and the wall.

¹ John Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library, 309.

Her search had been haphazard at best, so she thought some experts might give her advice on some tactics for the best ways to look the next time she misplaced something, because there would of course be a next time. The experts included “visual search researchers, a metal-detecting enthusiast and a detective.”² These different experts suggested identifying what makes the lost object stand out, such as its shape or color, considering scenarios about how it got lost in the first place, recreating the movement the object might have taken (like a ring dropped off a nightstand), changing your perspective (don’t just look at the floor), looking in weird places, and dividing the area into sections scouring one section at a time.³

My hunch is that the shepherd in Jesus’ first parable would have been wise to use the first technique, considering what made one lost sheep stand out in the wilderness: white woolly sheep in a field of brown brush and green grass, sounds like a plan. Maybe the woman in the second parable could have divided her home into sections and searched methodically area by area. Carry the lamp from this corner to that one and then to the next; again, this sounds like a wise plan. I don’t get the sense that the shepherd or the woman are all that methodical though. They are desperate to find the one missing and search frantically until that one is found. Yes, their searching sounds a bit ridiculous. You have 99 other sheep, Mr. Shepherd. Why would you risk losing the others to seek out one? And, ma’am, couldn’t the search wait until daylight? You still have nine coins, after all.

And then Jesus tells one of his most beloved parables about a man who has two sons. The younger son decides he wants to strike out on his own, leaving behind his home and his family, and he asks—demands really—his share of his father’s estate. The father agrees, dividing up his living, his life

² Malaka Gharib, <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/31/nx-s1-5050813/expert-techniques-to-find-missing-objects>

And in case you are wondering as I was, “Visual search refers to the process of actively looking for a specific target among distractors in a visual scene,” and amazingly there are brilliant people who study how we do this and how humanity has done this for millennia.

³ Gharib

between his two boys. The younger son heads out and squanders all he has received. He winds up enslaved to a stranger in a strange place taking care of pigs and unable even to eat what the pigs leave behind. Hungry and at rock bottom, the story goes that he comes to himself or to his senses and remembers what *he* has lost, what he has left behind. He decides to return home and serve as one of his father's well-fed servants. While faithful people have debated for centuries whether the younger son truly repents, whether he genuinely changes his heart and life, the parable *does* tell us that he does *not* assume that he will be welcomed back into the fold.

And yet, he is. Like the lost sheep and the lost coin, the younger son's return is not greeted with a scolding or even simply sigh of relief, but with a party, an extravagant, over-the-top celebration. Like a Super Bowl parade through the streets of the winning team's hometown, everything stops for the celebration. The entire household sets aside its daily routine to kill the fatted calf, roll up the rugs, break out the best china, and send invitations to the neighborhood to join the party.

Last week we heard Jesus urgently calling on people to repent, to change their hearts and lives and align their very beings with the values of God's kingdom, the priorities God had established for life with the people of God from the beginning. Jesus does not invent love of God and love of neighbor. The people of God have always been called to do both things. Jesus—God made flesh—is born to show us what that looks like since we are oh-so-inclined to lose our way.

When I have read or preached this story before, I confess that I have pictured God nodding sternly and wisely when I respond to grace and return to the fold, following where Jesus is actually going rather than setting my own course and my own agenda. Yes, I had heard Jesus telling me that God was searching like the shepherd and the woman and even keeping one eye on the road home looking for me like the father. I had even embraced the thought of God the father hiking up his robe and racing to welcome the prodigal home. I had not paid attention to how eager God would be to

throw a party over every last lost one brought back into the fold. That is the one consistent theme through the three stories, however. When the lost one is brought home, it is time for a party. God does not play it cool; God pulls out all the stops, all because a single lost one returned home and God expects everyone, including the heavenly host to join in. The only hiccup is the older brother.

As I think you know, I am the older of two siblings. In case I have not made it clear before, my younger brother is a better human than I am most days. He has not squandered anything, nor has he run away from home. That said, I can sympathize with the older brother in this story. Like most of you, I have been a rule following, people pleasing, good kid for most of my life. I was Girl Scout. I got good grades, colored within the lines, and did what I was told. I lived in fear of getting a blemish on my permanent record. And while I appreciated the occasional pat on the head, I certainly never expected a party. That said, if I were out keeping my nose clean while pulling weeds or folding laundry or paying my bills when a wild and wooly sibling returned home not to a reprimand but to a confetti-filled extravaganza, I would be livid. Even at the thought my pulse quickens and a voice inside shouts, "That's. Not. Fair!" And then another voice responds, "Grace is not fair."

Grace is not fair. And that is great good news. We do not have to earn it, which is also great news because we can't. No matter how hard we try, we will fail in large and small ways. God's grace is offered abundantly and freely. It is not pie; there is more than enough to go around. Again, this is good news for those of us who see ourselves in that older brother, because as the parable concludes, that brother needs that grace, too. He always did. The father does not love the older son because he stayed home and followed the rules. The father loves him because that is what the father does. The father goes looking for the older son, too, after all. And while the older son throws a tantrum over the unfairness of it all, the father does not scold him. Instead, the father responds by addressing him with tenderness. The first word the father says after the son grumbles and blusters is not *son*, but *child*:

[Child], you are always with me, and *all that is mine is yours*. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.⁴

In other words, the older son has lost nothing in light of his brother's return. I imagine there is another fatted calf at the ready if and when he decides to come home, too. And I suspect the father will keep an eye out for him as well, longing for that moment when he can celebrate the return of both of his boys.

Malaka Gharib closes her article by confessing that it was her stubbornness and her determination that led to the passport's being found. And that's the advice that her final expert recommends. Darryl Ellis, a private investigator with close to 30 years of experience gave her this advice:

"If I had to use one word, I would say tenacity," he says. If you've lost something you really care about, keep going. Don't give up.⁵

While I might be tempted to resent God's graciousness toward others who do not deserve it, I am struck with profound gratitude that God does not give up on me. God is the epitome of tenacity in seeking me out every time I go astray. I do not deserve God's grace any more than anyone else does. And yet Jesus insists that grace is not simply about God looking the other way when I lose my way, when I refuse to love God with every fiber of my being and my neighbor as myself. No, Jesus insists that every time God finds me tangled in a mess of my own making, God lovingly turns me around, welcomes me back to the fold, and then throws a party to celebrate my return. How could I not want to follow this One who throws a bash when even one child changes her stubborn heart and her set-in-

⁴ Luke 15: 31-32, NRSVue, emphasis added

⁵ Gharib

her ways life to follow God's lead? Who else looks for me with unmatched tenacity, patiently waiting for me to come to my senses or finish my tantrums? Who else throws a gala every time I wander back home?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.