

Luke 15:1 – 10 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable: ⁴“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. ⁸“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Exodus 32:7 – 14 ⁷The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” ⁹The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.” ¹¹But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” ¹⁴And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Psalm 51:1-10

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

⁵Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

⁹Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Grace, mercy and peace, to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, the God who rejoices in heaven when the lost are found and reunited with the faithful. Amen

As one who worked for the Red Cross for fifteen plus years and was also involved with Lutheran Disaster Response for upwards of twenty years, it is hard for me to turn the calendar to September and not remember that in our country this is National Preparedness Month. Certainly, that awareness is even more prevalent today, the 21st anniversary of the September 11th attacks on our nation. A common phrase used by those who work in disaster is ‘a new normal.’ From single family house fires, E5 tornadoes, Category 3 hurricanes, and yes, even COVID-19 pandemics or the sudden death of a loved one or long-standing ruler like Queen Elizabeth, disasters are ultimately turning points – a pivotal place in our lives that lead to a new place in time. The other phrase that I have spoken and also heard often in disaster preparedness training is – ‘It is never a question of IF a disaster will happen, it is a question of WHEN a disaster will happen.’ Its why in 2009 every major disaster organization in the country wrote a pandemic plan into their disaster preparedness plans. Disasters are a part of our journey, places of transition, but they are not the end of the journey.

Disasters are disruptive – they change our normal rhythm of living, they destroy property, they change how we can spend time together, they may even make those affected re-think where they live, the jobs they do, their family priorities, and how and where they practice their faith. They are often a cause for much grumbling and unhappiness. Consider for a moment some of the impacts of the pandemic. Suddenly school was on Zoom, employees were working at home. It was hard, we had to learn new ways of functioning! We had to isolate. We were separated from family members. When we went out to the stores we had to wear masks – they were uncomfortable among other things.

As a result, many living in NYC made a decision to move to Upstate New York. I have a nephew who moved from Washington DC to Ohio where the cost of living was more affordable. He still works for the same Washington based company. My son and his wife bought a bigger house so she could have an office at home where she will work indefinitely. Churches, including Trinity, had to figure out a new

way to worship. Let us lift a prayer of thanksgiving for the creators behind Zoom technology and to all those people who spent time to figure out how to make it all work. We grumbled, some chose to not participate, some discovered worship elsewhere because of internet connectivity. But at Zion we also had ‘joyful chaos – we connected on Zoom for conversation after worship. Someone I know did multiple Christmas Eve masses around the world in different time zones and with different cultures. Amidst the grumbling there were moments of rejoicing. I rejoiced that twice a week I could see three grandchildren and do school work with them because of Skype. An opportunity I never would have had if there’d been no pandemic.

And now two ½ years in we are indeed in a ‘new normal.’ We don’t totally know what it looks like yet. Some pre-COVID ways are returning, although they may look a bit different. Zoom worship appears in most places to be here to stay – for we have learned there are benefits to offering ways for homebound to join in our worship and for those who may be traveling to still connect with their faith community for worship. We have discovered that we can share the sacrament of communion remotely and God won’t strike us with a lightning bolt. We are connecting with our Lutheran neighbors in new ways through Bible study and next week’s picnic.

How might our scriptures this morning speak to this time we live in? A time in which there always seems to be much grumbling. Grumbling about the ways we are different from one another, about different viewpoints, different politics, different views on education, child-rearing, safe communities and workplaces, rising food prices and gasoline, the environment and how we deal with the pandemic. The list is endless.

In our Exodus text we hear God call the Israelites a ‘stiff-necked’ people. In the verses prior to our lesson, the Israelites have tired of waiting for Moses to come down the mountain from his meeting with God. They have grown impatient, did a fair amount of grumbling I suspect, and taken things into their own hands. They build a golden calf to worship as their god. And in response we hear God’s anger spoken to Moses and God’s intention to apparently destroy the people. I don’t know about you, but my God isn’t supposed to get angry – even when I deserve it.

God is faithful and just, not vengeful. Maybe that's what Moses is thinking too, when he says, 'Whoa, wait a minute.' He implores God to reconsider, to not bring disaster on the Israelites, reminding God of God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Israel. It's easy to focus on the idolatry of the Israelites, or on God's anger, but for me the best verse is the last one, "*And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.*" This verse that reminds us that we have a God who can be counted on to forgive and to be faithful in all things, is the most important message. That is cause for rejoicing indeed.

Grumbling is a bit of a theme in today's texts. Luke shares in our gospel, "*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him (Jesus). And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'*" I envision side conversations that sound like this, 'Why doesn't he sit with his own kind?' 'Who does he think he is talking with those poor, homeless people?' 'Doesn't he know that tax collectors sometimes steal?' 'Why doesn't he want to sit over here with us, with the other temple leaders?' 'I'm not spending time with him if that's who he associates with.'

Jesus' response takes the conversation to a different place. Rather than focusing on the differences of those involved – scribes and tax collectors, for example, Jesus tells them a parable that lifts up the one lost sheep. Shepherds were responsible for keeping track of the whole flock of sheep, it was their job. In the parable one sheep has apparently gotten lost – maybe it wandered off when the shepherd was gathering up some other sheep. Whatever happened, we see the shepherd leave the whole rest of the herd alone which potentially puts them all at risk. The shepherd goes off to find the one who is lost and finds it and rejoices!! And Jesus tells the Pharisees and scribes, "*there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.*" It's not about hanging out with the right crowd, it's about restoration of the lost.

Chapter 15 in Luke for me reads much like when as a parent I would tell one of my children how to do a task. It always seemed like it took 2 – 3 times before they got the message. Likewise with Jesus' lessons. He follows up the lost sheep with a parable about a lost coin (and the remaining verses in Luke are the Parable of the

Prodigal Son). Unlike the sheep who may have wandered off, a coin couldn't wander off on its own. The woman lost it somehow. However it was lost, the woman spends considerable time searching her house to find it, lighting the lamp and sweeping. If you've ever misplaced something at home you know how this works – we look and then we search some more, sometimes going back over the same places until what is missing has been found. And once found and restored to her change purse, she rejoices and celebrates with her friends and neighbors. As the Rev. Matt Skinner in this week's Working Preacher Brainwave shared, "It's All for Joy!"

Yes, it can feel like there is much to grumble about in our lives but Jesus is lifting up the joy, *'there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'* The Pharisees and scribes were only seeing what they saw as the differences and the negatives. In staying away from those who were perceived as 'less than' themselves, they potentially missed out on new friends, new understandings and new ideas and a chance to tell another about God. They were missing the fun and happiness Jesus experienced gathering with those who hadn't yet heard about God's amazing love and forgiveness and God's ability to restore relationships. We are quick to see the negatives of refugees crossing our borders and miss the opportunity to celebrate with the thousands who come to our country through refugee resettlement, through the opening of our doors to people of Ukraine or to give thanks for the many in our own area who have settled here and fill jobs at places like Chobani. We grumble about one day of rain and forget about the joy we had in the three sunny days that let us have a picnic or swim.

In all things including the regathering of faith communities and rebuilding of our lives post-pandemic, we can have confidence that we are loved by God who finds joy in the restoration of God's people. Through Jesus Christ God calls us to join in focusing on the joy of the world; to see the positives, large and small each day. In the midst of life's trials, sadness and grieving God is still present, breathing new life through the Holy Spirit into our midst. We are called to rejoice in the twenty that sit in our pews for Sunday morning worship, not just grumble about the 10 who don't come. We are called to give thanks for the few who lead and not just focus on grumbling that more people don't help.

As September begins a season transition, let's choose to focus on beautiful fall leaves and crisp morning air more than the coming snow and shoveling still months away. Let's encourage our children to rejoice that they can return to school without masks and gather with their friends, rather than grumble that summer vacation is over. As we remember those who gave their lives on this day twenty-one years ago, let us also lift prayers of gratitude for our nation's freedoms and overall relative peace. Let us remember God's gift of the Holy Spirit's presence always with us in all times and places. Let us remind one another of God's ever flowing mercy and God's promises of salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection. Let us remember that God indeed, *Creates in each of us a clean heart, and puts a new and right spirit within us*, for God rejoices in our restoration to God's kingdom. In those remembrances let us rejoice and be glad and share this good news with another.

Amen.