

**Reasons to Rejoice**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Luke 15:1-10**  
**September 11, 2016**

One day, a rich patron threw a party. The whole village was there. Jesus didn't sit at the VIP table. He sat with the sinners and the tax collectors. Have you ever been to a wedding reception and noticed a back table for the rowdier crowd? That's the image I have of Jesus on this day. He was sitting with the rowdy crowd. Some Scribes and Pharisees noticed this, and said, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus, just smiled. And what he did next was even better. He invited these Scribes and Pharisees over to his table, the rowdy table, and he said, "Come here, I want you to meet some of my friends." Three of Jesus' new friends told their stories to these doubters.

***Hello, I'm a sheep.*** My name is Baab (get it?). And I belong to a flock of one hundred. The other day, I was grazing some primo grass. It was green and crispy and tasty, just like an iceberg wedge. I suppose that grass must have been really intoxicating, because I looked up, and all of a sudden, I was all by myself. Somehow, someway, my flock had disappeared without me knowing it. I looked in every direction. Not another sheep to be found. I was utterly alone. Have you ever felt that way?

It's a scary feeling, but especially scary for us sheep. See, we've got this very strange defense mechanism, where when we get scared, we find a place to hide, and we ball up, and we won't respond to anything or anyone, even if they are friendly. Well it happened to me. And I was so scared. I found a bush, and curled up, and stayed there for several days. I shivered in the cold night, and cried aloud during the day, and hoped and hoped and hoped for someone or something to rescue me. It may sound weird, but I was helpless. I had no compass, no method, no hope to be found.

But that didn't mean I couldn't be helped. Our flock has quite a shepherd. He knows everyone's name. And when one of us goes missing, he searches unceasingly to find us. And if you've ever been found, it's quite a feeling. He grabs you with those big, sturdy hands, and sweeps you into muscular arms, and throws you over his shoulder, and carries you to safety. And if only you could see his joy. His shoulders shake with a laugh, and he skips a little, as you bounce on his shoulders, and he says, "Baab, I've got you," and "I love you," and "Welcome home." And he says to all his friends, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep."

***Hello, I'm a coin.*** The name's Lincoln. We don't buy you much these days, but back in Jesus' day we were more valuable. We could buy an ox, or a sheep, and we represented several days' wages. But regardless of the era, we've never been too animated. As a matter of fact, we're not animated at all. We can't move. We can't talk. The only thing we can do is be flipped, or placed in a pocket, or snatched up. I suppose we can roll, but that's never a good thing, because every time we roll down the street we end up getting lost.

I've been lost before, and let me tell you, it's no fun at all. One time, I was in someone's pocket, and they sat down on the couch, and as they did, gravity carried me under the couch cushion. I wasn't alone of course. I had plenty of company. There was a stale Cheeto, and a grape Skittle, and a paper clip, and a hair pen, and an old movie ticket, and some cat hair, and a few dust balls. And I don't mean to cast

any stones, but if you think coins make for bad conversationalists, paper clips are even worse. They have zero personality. I guess that's what happens when you spend your whole life devoted to paperwork.

But as unanimated as we may have been, us couch prisoners shared some common ground: we felt trapped and helpless, unable to cry out, unable to be found and reclaimed. There was no light. Everything outside sounded so muffled. And there was a constant pressure that pushed down on us. We were trapped.

And then one day, the pressure relented. The darkness turned to light. A soft hand reached down and plucked me up. A lovely older woman inspected me. She held me between her left finger and thumb, and she grinned at me, and her eye's twinkled. "Found ya!" she said. I felt so safe, so loved, so valued. And I had plenty of new company. My owner said to her neighbors, "I'm throwing a party. Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost!"

***Hello, I'm a son.*** A nameless son. And I was once lost. Lost in shame. I squandered my Father's inheritance. I did so many things I regret, I took so many people for granted, I made some really reckless choices. I alienated myself from every meaningful relationship in my life, so much so, that I was left homeless and friendless. And I was so hungry I was ready to eat pig slop. I was so lost, I thought I'd never be found.

One day, I decided to crawl back to my father. I didn't have any expectation of being restored or made whole. I just needed to see him, needed to be something other than lost, and I knew I couldn't do it on my own.

The day I came home, he saw me before I saw him, and he ran to me. And he hugged me. And he kissed me. And put a ring on my finger and a robe on my back. And I've never felt so safe, so warm, so loved, so excited, so alive. And I wasn't alone anymore. And I wasn't lost anymore. And my daddy was so happy. "Sonny, he said, "Found ya! You're home!" And he threw a party, and he invited everyone he knew, and he said, "Friends, rejoice with me, for this son of mine was lost, but now is found."

Two thousand years ago, Jesus took pleasure, great pleasure, in dining with women and men who had been labeled lost by the religious establishment. Jesus proclaimed that God's kingdom was near to all, even tax collectors and sinners and cast-outs. G. Penny Nixon phrases it this way: Jesus offered welcome and salvation even to those who couldn't grasp it for themselves.

The Pharisees and Scribes bristled at such a claim. For them, God's banquet was not a celebration of the mercy and grace that God offers to all people, but rather, an exclusive reward for the righteous.

Jesus does not share these three parables with the primary intent of offering hope to the sinners and the cast-outs. There's no need. His entire ministry is a testament to God's grace and acceptance. Instead, Jesus offers these three parables as a stern reminder to the religious establishment: God's kingdom is bigger than our sense of entitlement. When lost sheep find the embrace of their shepherd, when lost coins find the purse of their owners, when lost sons reunite with their fathers, there is cause for celebration. God's kingdom is just that big. It's big enough for everyone. And the more expansive it becomes, the more joy there is to go around.

Clarence Jordan says these parables reveal the true nature of God. He says, "God is not some celestial prison warden jangling the keys on a bunch of lifers. God is a shepherd searching for his sheep, a woman searching for her coin, a father searching for his son."

If Jordan is right (and by the way, I think he is!), then that means God searches for and longs for and pursues and even FINDS those whom society declares lost. And if Jordan is right, it means we have a choice to make: When a searching God reunites with a wandering soul, we can be good neighbors, and come to the party of shepherds and old women and fathers who rejoice over newly-found sheep and coins and sons. Or we can sit outside the banquet like a jealous brother, or an entitled Pharisee, missing God's party because we think God is too generous, too kind, and too forgiving to people not named "me?"

Well I don't know about you, but I'm going to the party. And when I get there, the first place I'm looking for is the rowdy table. I've got a feeling there will be a whole bunch of reasons to rejoice.

Amen.