

“Party of the First Part”

Jesus is amazing. I realize that this is an astonishingly lame thing to say, but it’s simply true: Jesus is amazing. He tells these wonderful little stories that are multi-dimensional. They’re so easy to grasp... at first. But what you see in them depends upon where you’re standing. And the same story can be comforting and reassuring or startlingly self-revealing. Within seconds we can be soothed and chastised by the same story. Amazing!

There are three such stories in rapid succession in the fifteenth chapter of Luke: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost (or prodigal) son. Luke groups them together because in the telling of these stories Jesus makes a simple but profound point about God: God rejoices deliriously when the lost are found.

The story of the lost sheep begins with a question that sounds rhetorical but isn’t: “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?” Actually, a lot of us wouldn’t leave the ninety-nine at all. We’d build bigger fences and enhance the security around them and implant chips in them and institute GPS surveillance and keep them away from the green pastures and still waters and feed them on pellets. One percent: isn’t that an acceptable loss ratio? Risk management: keep your eye on the ball and focus on the ninety-nine.

Not so with God, Jesus is telling us. This shepherd moves heaven and earth to find the one sheep that is lost, then calls together friends and neighbors for a party. Rejoice! And then the punch line: “Just 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.” Great! Or is it?

The second story begins with the word “or,” as a way of letting us know that it’s a different way of saying the same thing. In this instance the God figure is a woman who has lost a coin. Small house, close quarters, dirt floor, only one little window: she lights a lamp and sweeps the house to find her coin. This is a major project in a multi-purpose space where people sat on the floor and slept on rugs on the floor. When she finds the coin, it’s party time—the same party as the party of the first part. The lost has been found! This is what it’s all about! Rejoice!

And then there’s the story of the two sons. It’s not a part of today’s lesson, but you know this one: one of them stays at home, the other blows the inheritance at Monte Carlo. The father trips all over himself welcoming home the wayward son: robes flying, he runs out across the field blubbering commands: bring the ring! The fatted calf! The shoes and the best robe! Rejoice!

There is good news in these stories, isn’t there? God cares for the lost. God is that kind of shepherd. God is that kind of woman. God is that kind of father. God cares passionately and deeply for each one of us. God undertakes great effort and even risk to

reach out to us. In forgiving us and welcoming us home, God becomes vulnerable to sheep like us who wander off, coins like us who get turned on edge and wobble off into strange places, children like us who want to sample life in the fast lane.

“Do you want to give God joy?” Jesus is saying. “Come home.” God is all about the party that celebrates the homecoming. That’s one way to read these stories, one level of meaning in them. And it feels *wonderful*.

But there’s another dimension. It comes from the fact that these stories are addressed to some scribes and Pharisees who are grumbling and complaining that Jesus welcomes tax collectors and sinners and *eats* with them. Tax collectors were collaborators, Jews who collected taxes from Jews to support the occupying Roman legions. Sinners were those failed to follow the laws of Moses; they were ritually unclean, and defiled those who came in contact with them, especially through table fellowship. But there was Jesus, mixing it up with these folks! What in the name of heaven did he think he was doing?

These scribes and Pharisees were resentful because Jesus spent more time with outcasts than he did with folk who were at least trying to be righteous. So as Jesus tells these innocent-sounding stories, the repeated punch line packs a punch: “Just 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.” Jesus is making clear his mission and calling these critical scribes and Pharisees to join the party. He calls them to care more about what God cares about. But they’re not so sure.

The third story, the one about the two sons, ends with a scene that dramatizes the attitude of these scribes and Pharisees. The father is outside the party and pleading with the older son, the one who stayed at home, to join in the celebration. The father says, “...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.” But we never find out how the story ends. Does the older son join the party or not? Jesus never tells us.

In the case of these scribes and Pharisees, the answer is no. They never do agree to party with Jesus. They never accept his portrayal of God’s priorities. They regard Jesus as a threat to their kind of religion. And their conflict with Jesus will continue all the way to the cross. To the very end they care more for the purity of their piety than for the inclusiveness of God’s embrace.

But these folks are not so hard to understand. Their resentment makes sense. How can you devote your life to worshipping and serving a God who cares more for the sinner than for those who try at least to be righteous? Does God reward sinners and just ignore the good boys and girls? And how do I know I’m good unless I can point to someone who is recognizably bad and say, “Thank you, God, that I am not like that.”? What is the point of being inside the circle of God’s favor if there are not others who are outside?

This sounds harsh and crude, but it’s really subtle and slippery; because before too long we find ourselves thinking things like, “Thank you, God, that I’m not like those Pharisees.” Or, “Thank you, God, that I’m not like those fundamentalists.” Or, “Thank you, God, that I’m not like those... [you fill in the blank].” And before you know it

we're more attentive to the precise delineation of the outside boundaries of the circle of God's people than we are to the central purpose that calls us together.

My teacher and mentor Eugene Wehrli used to say that everybody is worried about the outside of the circle, who's in and who's out; but that a circle is really defined by what is at the center. If we keep our focus on the center of the circle and on growing closer to the heart of the faith, the outside boundaries will become unimportant and even uninteresting.

For us the center of the circle is the God of love revealed in Jesus Christ. The party of the first part is rejoicing with God over sinners forgiven, wanderers come home, the lost being found. The purpose of our community of faith is to welcome people into relationship with God and to foster the growth of that relationship. As we all grow in love of God, we also grow in love of neighbor. We participate in God's work of transforming human hearts and reshaping human society in the image of God's welcome, God's love, God's justice. Remember the center: it's all about the welcoming love of God... and rejoicing.

Whenever the church is at its best, it's because that's what we're doing: reaching out in welcome and focusing on the love at the center and calling all God's children home. When the church is at its worst we're concerned about keeping our boundaries intact, afraid of contamination from the world. We turn our back on the center in order to patrol the perimeter. We relate to those on the outside with judgment. We cloak ourselves in righteousness and refuse to join the party until the lost sheep have appropriately apologized—to us!—for wandering off. We stay outside the celebration until the prodigal has paid his penalty in full, restoring the inheritance with interest and acknowledging that he is not worthy to be in our exalted company.

So sometimes we get it right, and sometimes we don't. When we are good, by the grace of God, we are very, very good. And when we are bad, we are horrid.

So... which is Plymouth Church? That's a good question to be asking this 150th Anniversary year. The truth is that we're both good and bad, sometimes better than others. Our history is a remarkable story. I hope we'll learn it, reflect on it and treasure it. But I also hope we won't idealize it, or paint it in rosy hues. The people who went before us were more like us that they were unlike us, with a mixture of motives and an incomplete understanding even of their own actions. They were part of a drama that is still playing out: a drama in which we are now playing a part.

On December 6, 1857, ten people entered into covenant to form Plymouth Church, and an eleventh joined the same day. At first they struggled quite a bit, with a 26' X 42' building on rented ground at Fourth and Court. They later moved that same building to Seventh and Locust. By 1871 there were 166 of them to welcome the Reverend A. L. Frisbie from Connecticut. Frisbie was pastor for twenty-eight years, until 1899. And in those years the membership grew to over 600. Two buildings, really, were built due to the expansiveness of Frisbie's ministry. And Plymouth was instrumental in the forming of satellite congregations throughout the city: the Pilgrim, North Park and Greenwood churches.

In the early 1920's the city condemned Plymouth's relatively new building at Eighth and Pleasant so that Keo Way could be built. The church saw an opportunity and decided to move to the very outskirts of civilization, way out here to 41st and Ingersoll. And the Greenwood and Waveland churches united with the old Plymouth to form one grand new Plymouth. Did you ever wonder why we have a Greenwood Room and a Waveland Hall? They are named for the churches that came together to form this great church. The sanctuary, this wonderful room, was dedicated on November 20, 1927.

Stoddard Lane came to the grand new church in 1929, and was here until his death in 1943. He championed outreach in ecumenism. He coined the Plymouth motto: "We agree to differ. We resolve to love. We unite to serve." He oversaw the expansion of the program. And he very nearly presided over the bankruptcy of the church.

Since the 1940's Plymouth has grown to 3,000 members, expanded the building three times, broadened community outreach, become more inclusive and participatory and exploded in programming. Just look at the lineup for this first semester from the Center for Spiritual Growth!

What's ahead? That's what we'll be thinking about together this fall. Plymouth at its best has always embodied the spirit of outreach and community involvement. When we are doing well at doing good we are open-minded, tender-hearted, far-sighted and other-directed. And we know how to party. When the church is healthy there is always a sense of newness and excitement because somebody new has found a home here and brought along new ideas and energy.

Jesus keeps calling us back to the joy of welcoming people into relationship with God and helping that relationship grow, to transform hearts and to change the world. Come on back to the party of the first part. That's why we're here. Thanks be to God.

Amen

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