

1 Timothy 1:12-17

1:12 I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service,

1:13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,

1:14 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

1:15 The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the foremost.

1:16 But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.

1:17 To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Luke 15:1-10

15:1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus.

15:2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

15:3 So Jesus told them this parable:

15:4 "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?

15:5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

15:6 And 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.'

15:7 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.

15:8 "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?

15:9 When 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.'

15:10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." The word of the Lord...

Proclamation of the Word

A motif runs through the wonderfully poignant and humorous movie *Babe*.

The animals on Hoggett Farm all had pre-conceived notions about one another:
sheep were convinced that dogs were stupid,
dogs were convinced that sheep were stupid and—
as the narrator often intoned—nothing would convince them otherwise.

“The way things are is the way things are” the animal characters would say to one another as a way to bolster their established prejudice.

Babe, the Pig-dog, is caught between the sheep and the dogs and promises himself that he will never think badly about another creature again.

Babe gets it!

We find Jesus today, not on a farm, but among the people.

Jesus has been welcoming sinners and tax collectors- the lowest of society.

And not only is he welcoming them- embracing them, with open arms, the word means in Greek (*prosdechomai*).

Pharisees and scribes grumble.

Two groups: the Temple elite, the good upstanding folks, and in their minds, the unclean, pagan sinners and tax collectors.

Each group would probably say, "The way things are is the way things are."

Or as we are known to say in the church, "We have always done it that way."

Grumbling- we have heard that before in the Bible.

The Hebrew children wandering in the wilderness begin to grumble and complain.

This is not at all what they expected or wanted, to be lost in a dry, barren wilderness.

They have forgotten that God was leading them towards a promised land.

When we forget God's faithfulness, sometimes we grumble.

Jesus addresses their grumbling head on with the parable of the lost things: sheep, a coin, and after, a prodigal son which we did not read today.

Jesus asks, "Which one of you, would not leave the 99 sheep and go after the one that is lost?"

Well, truth be told, I would more likely cut my losses and stand guard over the 99.

It makes sense. It is that whole bird in the hand thing.

Like in triage, save as many as you can, the best as you can, knowing some will inevitably be lost, a painful unavoidable truth.

Why make the 99 vulnerable for the sake of one?

But apparently, God does not work this way.

The lost one gets preferential treatment.

God says:

I know the number of hairs on your head. AND

I will go seek you out when you get lost or stray away. AND

I will get down on my knees, flashlight in hand, to sweep aside the dust bunnies until I find you.

God does not write off those most of us would deem at best unworthy, and at worst irredeemable.

This familiar parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin reveals that God will go the distance, to not leave us to our own devices and destruction.

God takes a tremendous risk, sending the Son to seek and save the lost no matter how stupid and skilled at evil we sinners are, individually and corporately. ⁱ

That is the Gospel in a nutshell.

We worship and serve a God who seeks, embraces the sinner and the lost-
even those not trying to be found.

Pastor Hugh Reed tells the story of Allen, in his own words:ⁱⁱ

Allan (not his real name) came to me at my previous church in Hamilton,
wanting to be baptized.

He was a child (or victim) of the “me decade” and felt compelled to leave home and family to find himself and, of course, lost himself, becoming a stranger to himself and the world, wandering the streets of Vancouver trapped in a world of drugs.

One night he managed to get off the street for a night in one of the shelters.

He crashed into the bunk, staring up at the ceiling, listening to the groans, and

trying not to be overcome by the odors of the strangers in the bunks around him.

He didn’t know where he was,

he didn’t know who he was,

but he wanted it to be over with and he considered how he might take his own life.

He was shaken out of his thoughts when someone came in and called out a name from another world.

“Is Allan Roberts here?”

That had been his name once, but he hadn’t heard it for some time. He hardly knew Allan Roberts anymore. It couldn’t be him being called.

The caller persisted, “Is there anybody named Allan Roberts here?”

No one else answered and so Allan took a risk. “I’m Allan Roberts (or used to be).”

"Your mother is on the phone."

My mother, no, you've made a mistake. I don't know where I am, how could my mother know where I am?

"If you're Allan Roberts, your mother is on the phone."

Unsure what to expect, he went to the desk in the hall and took the receiver.

"Allan," it was his mother, "It's time for you to come home."

"Mom, I don't know where I am, I have no money, you don't know what I'm like anymore. I can't go home."

"It's time for you to come home. There's a Salvation Army officer who's coming to you with a plane ticket. He's going to take you to the airport to get you home."

She hadn't known where he was, she just called every shelter and hostel for months until she found him.

He went home and, supported and loved by his mother, who had never ceased to know him even though he had forgotten himself, and influenced and inspired by the faith that had sustained his mother's hope and love, he began attending church services and one day came to Pastor's office seeking to be baptized.

Hugh Reed says,

Allen did not find his own way to my office . . . A path, not of his own making, [was] made by the love that found him, that knew him better than he knew himself, and invited him to "follow me."

We worship and serve a God who seeks, in fact, embraces the sinner and the lost-
even those not trying to be found.

God pursues and seeks, and even embraces, especially, the lost, broken, and sinner among us.

God values those people that most of us de-value.

God is a God who will persevere until every last one of God's children is back home safely.

I now have a new appreciation for Psalm 23, that great Shepherd psalm which begins, The Lord is my Shepherd...and I have never thought about that line, "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life."

God who is goodness and mercy personified, will follow and seek and pursue us all the days of our lives.

Just a chapter before in Luke, Jesus is calling disciples to take up a cross and follow him. And now, Jesus reminds us that this is reciprocal.

God's goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives.

And we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

That's worth rejoicing over.

That's worth killing the fatted calf and having a party.

But the smugly righteous ones, the religious ones, will have none of it- just grumbling.

Jesus invites us to rejoice with him instead.

Annie Dillard in her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* reports from her childhood in Pittsburgh. As a 7-year-old, "I used to take a precious penny of my own and hide it for someone else to find. I would cradle it at the roots of a sycamore, say, or in a hole left by a chipped-off piece of sidewalk. Then I would take a piece of chalk, and, starting at either end of the block, draw huge arrows leading up to the penny from both directions. After I learned to write I labeled the arrows: surprise ahead or money this way. I was greatly excited, during all this arrow-drawing, at the thought of the first lucky passer-by who would receive in this way, regardless of merit, a free gift from the universe...

The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand.

But – and this is the point – who gets excited by a mere penny?

But if you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day...."

You will be surprised by joy.

Rejoicing over a penny...

Today as you walk back to your cars, you might find a penny.

There are 100 pennies strewn all over the property.

You might come upon one or even hunt for them, just for the pure joy of finding them!

A penny is a small thing to most of us, but it is the pleasure of the surprise, and the reminder that small things matter, most especially to God.

Things of little value to most, matter to God!

When they find the sheep and the coin, both the Shepherd and the woman say,

"Rejoice with me!"

"Rejoice with me!" says God when a person finds home, a community, and belonging.

Finding herself and god's love.

He or she was lost but now is found.

And the Pharisees and the Scribes who think they are found, already in the club with all the rights and privileges thereunto,

they are truly the ones who are lost.

They are missing the good news of God's mercy and love.
They just grumble instead.
But joy and gratitude are a response to mercy.

Grateful for the mercy shown to us, we have mercy to share.
Fort Hill church is called to "Share the Good News Joyfully!"
So this week, go out, not just on a penny hunt,
 but looking for the Kingdom of God among us,
and if you are hanging out with sinners and tax collectors,
 or those the world casts out and devalues.
You may just be surprised to find that God is already there among them.

ⁱ Always grateful to Jill Duffield and her lectionary resource, "Looking into the Lectionary this Week," Presbyterian Outlook.

ⁱⁱ From a sermon by Hugh Reed, as quoted in Paul Scott Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon* (Abingdon, 2008, pp. 159-60)