

**“Let’s Party!”****Pastor Becky Stephens****Text: Luke 15:1-10**

When I entered high school, my parents gave me a beautiful bracelet. 10 carat solid gold. It was a simple rope chain bracelet. I loved it. I wore it every day without exception. It was my pride and joy. I wore that bracelet all the time and only took it off to bathe or if I was going to be outside at the barn or in the ocean. Those were the only occasions I can remember taking that bracelet off. It was that important to me. Besides the fact that I loved jewelry, and in particular, that bracelet, every time I looked at that bracelet, it was a reminder that I was loved.

On a winter morning waiting on the bus, I had to put on my gloves and coat. When I got to school, I took off my coat and gloves. And by 2<sup>nd</sup> period, I realized my bracelet was no longer on my hand! I almost went into a panic attack. I had lost my bracelet. I searched my coat, I searched my gloves, I searched the classroom, the hallways, the sidewalk, the parking lot. My Mom even called Frank, the bus driver, and he searched the bus. That afternoon, I even searched the bus. It was nowhere to be found. I was devastated. I just knew my parents were never going to trust me again, since I couldn’t even keep up with a simple bracelet. It was gone. But it didn’t stop me from looking. For my next 3 ½ years of high school, I was always looking in crevices, at the sidewalk. Even now, I have gone back to my high school for ballgames and caught myself looking down at the sidewalk to see if it might just be there—even after all these years. (I lost it in 1987.) And I know I won’t stop looking for that bracelet. I’ll probably always have hope that it will turn up somewhere.

And that’s exactly how God looks at us, all of us! The Bible is full of all kinds of good news, especially in the Gospels. But some of the best news of the Gospel is right here in this passage from Luke. And it’s this: **God in Jesus Christ comes to us; God seeks us in our lostness!** We are so special to God that he searches for us and never gives up. In fact, God is so determined to find the lost that he sent his Son among us! As Jesus tells these two parables to the grumbling scribes and Pharisees, he unveils this amazing and wonderful truth about our God. No Pharisee had ever dreamed of a God like that, a God who would so desperately search after the lost. No Pharisee would have ever conceived of a God who went out to search for sinners. But this is the love of God; the love that

became incarnate in Jesus Christ, who came to seek and to save the lost. And God in Jesus Christ is never going to give up that search on us, or on anyone else! Nor should we! And every time the lost is found, we should join in the heavenly celebration! Let's Party!

**But why is this big celebration so important?** If we are to truly understand the celebration of the shepherd and the woman, we have to understand these parables as Jesus' first hearers would have.

### Shepherd

The people of Jesus' time would have easily understood the important and difficult job of a shepherd. Throughout biblical times, tending flocks and agriculture were the basis of the economy in the Middle East. And in Judea, shepherding was no easy task! It was difficult and dangerous. Pasture was scarce. The narrow central plateau in that area was only a few miles wide, and then it plunged down to the wild cliffs and the terrible devastation of the desert. There were no retaining walls and the sheep would wander. A poet describes the shepherd in this way: *When you meet a shepherd, you are immediately struck by him, "sleepless, far-sighted, weather-beaten, armed, leaning on his staff and looking out over his scattered sheep, every one of them on his heart, you understand why the shepherd of Judea sprang to the front in his people's history; why they gave his name to the king and made him their symbol of providence; why Christ took him as the type of self-sacrifice."*

The shepherd was personally responsible for the sheep. They were experts at tracking and could follow the straying sheep's footprints for miles across the hills. There was not a shepherd for whom it was not all in a day's work to risk his life for his sheep. And sure enough, when reports came that a sheep was lost; the whole village would wait and watch, until they saw the shepherd striding home with the sheep across his shoulders. And then the whole community would celebrate in joy and thanksgiving! Christ came to seek and to save the lost! There is no greater reason to celebrate than that!!! Let's Party!

### Woman

And what of that woman and her lost coin? The coin the woman lost was a silver drachma, worth about a day's wages, not an extravagant amount. But the meaning of the parable would be lost if the coin was of some great monetary value. Though it is possible that the thorough searching by the woman was out of sheer necessity; if she didn't have that coin, the family didn't eat.

The more likely possibility was that this coin had a more sentimental significance. The mark of a married woman was a headdress made of ten silver coins linked together by a silver chain. For perhaps years a girl would scrape and save to amass her ten coins, for the headdress was almost the equivalent of her wedding ring. It may well be that it was one of these coins that the woman had lost, and so she searched for it as any woman would search if she lost her wedding ring.

It would not be difficult to lose a coin in a house at that time, and it might take a long search to find it. The houses were very dark, lit only by one little circular window, not much more than about a foot and a half across. The floor was beaten earth covered with dried reeds and rushes; and to look for a coin on a floor like that was very much like looking for a needle in a haystack.

The woman swept the floor in the hope that she might see the coin glint or hear it jingle as it moved. And you can be sure that the moment the woman found that coin, she would call all her women friends over for a great celebration! You can easily imagine the great joy of the woman when at last she saw the glint of the elusive coin and when she held it in her hand again.

God, said Jesus, is like that. God searches after us with such determination as a shepherd who seeks after a lost sheep, or a woman who looks for her most prized possession. And when the lost is found, a heavenly celebration ensues! A party takes place!

**What would the church look like if it were just one big, giant party?** Ha. It's kind of hard to imagine that, isn't it? In some ways, the modern church has become awfully legalistic like the scribes and Pharisees, who probably balked at the idea of a big celebration over some sinners who came to eat dinner with Jesus. But really, that's what this passage is all about, and that's what the church should be about, too! As those called to follow in Christ's footsteps, we should be out in the world, seeking out the lost as fervently as a shepherd searches for a lost sheep, or a woman searches for her most prized possession; as determinedly as Christ seeks each of us out. And the very moment that the lost is found, we should throw a huge party!

These parables that Jesus tells in response to the grumbling Pharisees are spoken down through the generations to us as well! They still have the power to expose the roots of bitterness that dig their way into us whenever we feel that God is too good to others and not good enough to us.

Typically, we want mercy for ourselves and justice for others, but the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin call for us to celebrate with God because God has been merciful not only to us but to others also, even those we would not otherwise have accepted into our fellowship! And that was exactly where the scribes and Pharisees were having trouble. They had a problem with these people that Jesus was eating with on a regular basis; these tax-collectors and sinners. These friends of Jesus were people who were regarded by the “self-appointed experts” as hopelessly irreligious, and out of touch with the demand that God had made on Israel through the law. Do you sometimes look around you and see people in this way; as hopeless and inadequate? If only we would learn to judge joy according to Jesus’ judgment!

You see, Jesus is not saying through these parables that such people are to simply be accepted as they stand. Sinners must repent. The lost sheep and the lost coin are found. But Jesus has a different idea than his critics of what “repentance” means. For the Pharisees, nothing short of adopting *their* standards of purity and law observance would do. But for Jesus, when people follow him and his way, that is true repentance.

I think in some way, Jesus is saying even to the scribes and the Pharisees that they need to repent, too. Perhaps even we need to repent. *“I tell you,”* Jesus says, *“there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.”* When we remember these words of Jesus, then the point of the parables becomes clear. This is why there’s a party going on: all heaven is having a party, the angels are joining in, and if we don’t as well, we’ll be out of tune with God’s reality. If we discover what’s going on in heaven, we’ll discover how things were meant to be on earth. Jesus is here declaring that heaven was having a great, noisy party every time a single sinner saw the light and began to follow God’s way, and if we want to know the fullness of God’s kingdom, we have to join in that celebration too; starting right here, in our very own neighborhoods.

People may think we are crazy, but the message of Jesus is radical. There is no one out there that has to do anything, or has to be a certain way. No one has to earn God’s love or Jesus’ respect. And if we here at Bucyrus are going to be truly hospitable in the way that Jesus is hospitable, no one should have to earn our love or respect either. I’m never going to give up looking for my gold bracelet, and we as a church should never stop looking for the lost either. Like Jesus, we should love seeking out the lost and celebrate finding them! So let’s party!