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Dr. Lewis F. Galloway
Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28, Luke 15:1-10

“God’s Joy”

The Pharisees and the scribes have every right to grumble about Jesus. All the wrong sort of people flock to him: tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes and assorted moral misfits. He not only welcomes them, he even sits down and eats with them. It is enough to make a good, respectable person lose her appetite. What is this new rabbi thinking? On one hand, he shows such profound understanding of the law; on the other hand, he promotes dangerous interpretations of the law. He is supposed to be leading people to God, not away from God.

They have every right to grumble about Jesus. Doesn’t he know the history of his own people? God makes a covenant with Israel in the wilderness. The Lord will be their God; they will be God’s people. God gives them the law to be their guide in faithfulness. Every Jew knows the terrible consequences of forsaking God and disobeying the covenant. Over the centuries, the prophets warn the people about their faithlessness, social injustice and sin.

Jeremiah speaks of the disaster that will come upon the people and their land as a consequence of their sin. The prophet Jeremiah paints a picture of an invading army coming in judgment against the people like a hot wind blowing from the heights across Judah and into Jerusalem. It is a wind that is too powerful to be withstood. It is a wind that will do more than separate the wheat from the chaff; it is a wind that will do more than blow away the refuse in the streets and sandblast the buildings clean. The fierce anger of God will upset the careful order of creation. The wind will blow the stars out of the heavens; the hills will collapse; the fertile fields will become a desert; the cities will become a ruin. Everything that the eye can see will return to the unformed void. The fierce wind of God’s judgment will be the undoing of creation. Jeremiah grieves at the coming destruction. Jeremiah knows that he too will lose family, friends and home. He pictures the whole creation mourning for the sins of Israel. The people have brought this destruction upon themselves for their foolish, faithless and evil ways.

The Pharisees wonder, “Doesn’t Jesus know what happened? Was he asleep in Hebrew school that day?” Destruction came and the people went into exile. Now the Pharisees, scribes, and the truly religious people feel they have this chance to get it right. Some of the Pharisees think that if all the people of Israel obey the law perfectly for one day, then the Messiah will come to usher in God’s kingdom. This is one reason why the Pharisees are so concerned not only with what they do, but with what other people do. In their minds there is good theological justification for being the moral police and religious busybodies. Here comes this Jesus stirring up the people, setting a bad example, publicly violating the law, and upsetting the donkey cart—all in the name of God. The Pharisees think, “You can’t be too careful; you’ve got to keep the people

in line. Why people might even slack off and take advantage of God's favor. Jesus' behavior is a life and death matter for Israel. His ideas are dangerous!"

At the heart of the controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees is the question of God's nature. Is God's way with fallen, broken people like an unrelenting destructive wind or is there something greater than the wind of God's anger? Jesus tells a series of parables about lost things to suggest that God has another way of dealing with a fallen world. One day, a shepherd with a hundred sheep is counting noses and realizes that one sheep is lost. The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness and goes off to search for the one that is lost. Do you hear where he left the ninety-nine? He left them in the wilderness, not in the safety of the sheepfold on the farm back home. He takes a tremendous risk to find the one that is lost. It is not prudent. It does not make good business sense. Most of us would cut our losses and move on. We have close friends whose family has raised sheep on the same hillside in Scotland for five hundred years. In lambing season they do all that they can to save every lamb. They would never put the whole flock at risk for the sake of one lamb.

In the same way, Jesus tells about a woman who has ten coins and loses one. Even though she still has the nine, she stops everything else she is doing and turns the house upside down looking for the lost coin. She works so late into the night that she has to light a lamp to search in the dark. She spends an inordinate amount of time and energy on her search. She may even have spent more time looking than the coin is worth. Many people would be grateful that they still had 90% of their savings, but this woman keeps on searching until she finds the lost coin.

The time and energy expended by the shepherd and the woman in finding what was lost seems all out of proportion to what is found. Jesus says that God is like that. God goes to any length to find the lost and bring the sinner home. When the lost are found and the sinful restored, there is more joy in heaven over "one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." In case we miss the point, Jesus then tells the story of the lost son who goes far from home and loses himself in wild living. When he returns to his father's house, he is welcomed with a soft robe for his tired body, a ring for his calloused fingers, new sandals for his cracked feet and food for his hungry stomach.

A lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost boy tell us about God's amazing ways in the world. God's desire is to redeem the lost, not destroy the lost. God judges us in order to save us. The Pharisees and the scribes should have known this too. God's mercy is hidden in God's judgment. Even as God sends the wind of exile to judge Israel, God also says in Jeremiah, "The whole land shall be a desolation; yet, I will not make a full end." (4:27) God holds open the door of hope so that future generations of people like you and me many enter a place called home. The hot burning wind that empties and cleanses us becomes the fresh breeze of the Holy Spirit that seeks us out and gives us life. There is a limit to judgment, but there is no limit to grace. Our Presbyterian *Brief Statement of Faith* declares that God is "like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child," and "like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home." Life comes to us

not by our tiresome striving, but by God's tireless seeking. Salvation comes not through our obsession with perfectionism, but through God's decision for mercy. In Jesus we see that God's justice is God's mercy.

The parables end with this business of God wanting to throw a party every time something lost is found—a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost boy. The shepherd hasn't even latched the gate to the animal pen before he starts calling all his friends to come over. The woman who finds the coin wakes up all the neighbors so that they can join in the celebration. The father of the prodigal son forgets all about the fact that it's a workday when he says to the hired hands, "Drop everything, we've got some partying to do!" In finding the lost, God's joy that lies hidden in creation breaks out.

It is this same joy, God's joy, that makes the righteous so nervous and the smug so uncomfortable. They can't stand a party for someone who, in their minds at least, doesn't deserve it. These three stories of a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost boy begin and end with grumbling people. Pharisees and scribes murmur angrily at the beginning; a resentful elder brother sulks at the end. But God has not forgotten them either. They are already in the fold. They never left. God's mercy is there for the Pharisees, the scribes and the elder brother. God has never abandoned them. They are in danger of abandoning God because they cannot accept God's boundless joy when sinners are found.

In a poem entitled, "God's Joy," the mystical Persian poet Rumi wrote these words about God's way in the world:

God's joy moves from unmarked box to unmarked box,

From cell to cell.

As rainwater, down into flower bed.

As roses, up from ground.

Now it looks like a plate of rice and fish,

Now a cliff covered with vines,

Now a horse being saddled.

It hides within these,

Till one day it cracks them open.

There is something at the heart of creation that is always resisting our desire to keep the lid on things, calculate all the costs, never take risks, and miss the joy of life. God

is at the heart of creation joyfully cracking things open, bringing the lost home, and welcoming everyone to the joyful celebration of new life.

In his novel *Jayber Crow*, Wendell Berry gives a first person account of a barber in the small town of Port William. Jayber also serves as the church custodian and sometime gravedigger. He lives quietly and never marries, but he is a keen observer of life. Jayber Crow reaches a deep faith through life's struggles and by following his own spiritual path. One day he sees the widow of a man he much admired visit her husband's grave. She speaks of how she knows he is not there and how she does not feel his presence in the graveyard, but she still comes to visit his grave to think of him. After she leaves, Jayber thinks how she put into his head the thought of Heaven. He writes, "I thought... of a sound I could not imagine but could almost hear: the outcry when a soul shakes off death at last and comes into Heaven. I don't speak of this because I 'know' it. What I know is that shout of limitless joy, love unbound at last, our only native tongue." (p. 268)

There is so much joy to be shared. This "limitless joy" is "our native tongue." It is the song God created us to sing. It can be heard every time God cracks somebody open and brings that person home. It can be heard in the church when we welcome one another home. I envision our congregation being a community of faith that is always looking for signs of God's unlimited mercy at work in the world, always welcoming fellow sinners like us home, and always singing the songs of "limitless joy."

Jesus says there is more than enough mercy to go around. So who needs to repent? Sinners, certainly. Could it be that the righteous also need to repent, to turn around, to see things in a new way and join the joyful celebration of the people of God.