

**A Heavenly Party©**  
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**Luke 15:1-10**

**Dr. Sharlyn Gates**

Isn't it interesting how Jesus has a way of taking people and things that are often seen as having little value and holds them up as being very valuable indeed?

We keep reading about how Jesus has these run-ins with the Pharisees and the Scribes, don't we? Luke has Jesus healing on the Sabbath and eating with sinners and tax collectors.

The Pharisees are lay people who are very strict in keeping the law. They are actually called "lawyers." They are the ones who make sure everyone is obeying the Jewish law –with all its rules and rituals.

The Scribes are the educated interpreters of the law. There were so many rules and rituals about being "clean" and not contaminating one's religious self with food – or people – who were unclean. Scribes and Pharisees were the rule keepers for anyone who was committed to being a devout Jew.

Since we have our own rules in how we do things, we might want to be careful about how quickly we judge these religious leaders. We don't want to think we would be as legalistic as the religious rulers of Jesus' day but – even in the most mundane things in the church, we sometimes catch ourselves saying – or at least thinking – we've never done it like that before! They need to learn our rules, how we do things around here.

In churches I have served in the past, I have learned that new members have, sometimes, had a difficult time having their idea for something new really heard and received. We all tend to become a little rigid in how we think things should be done – because we are human and we are creatures of habit.

But really, there is a deeper, more rigid legalism going on here with these Scribes and Pharisees than we will probably ever experience – at least I hope that is true!

As I read this passage I couldn't help but think of an incident we experienced at First Presbyterian Church, where I served in Parsons, Kansas. You all know who Fred Phelps is, don't you? He is the self-proclaimed pastor of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas and I'm pretty sure most of his members are from his own family.

This is the hate group that goes to the funerals of children after a national tragedy, or fallen military members, and protest with signs that say God hates America – among all the other things God supposedly hates.

Well, I believe it was in 2005 when we had a visit from them. One of our members was the editor of the local newspaper and she wrote an article in defense of the civil rights for same-sex couples. This caught the attention of the members at Westboro Baptist Church and they announced online that they were going to pay us a visit. And they did.

That morning there were several of them who surrounded the church with their hateful signs and the slurs that they were free to shout at our members.

First Pres stands on a city corner with public sidewalks and an alley on 3 sides. The parking lot is across the street so the protestors were able to freely greet and chide each member as they walked across the street to come into the church.

We had 2 men from the church standing outside to greet our members, walking with them and talking to them to try to shield them from the hateful comments.

Inside, we were determined to not even speak their names or acknowledge they were there. So I preached about the legalism of the Pharisees and how Jesus always was a friend to those whom the religious leaders thought were unclean.

We talked about how a meal was so important in Jesus' day and how he was always sitting and eating with those who were considered outcasts and sinners – always showing grace over law – always lifting them up as people of great value.

In our story today, Jesus tells two parables. One is the story of a lost sheep. One measly lamb! This shepherd has 99 other sheep. Why would he be so intent on searching for the one? Why would he leave the 99 to fend for themselves so he could find that one?

It's interesting that the Bible, in several places in the Old and New Testaments, uses the Shepherd as a metaphor for God – or Jesus. Honestly, shepherds were not held in high esteem either!

They were considered a rough, tough, dirty group of shiftless thieves, even though agriculture and tending sheep were the main source of economy in

Palestine and shepherds were a naturally big part of keeping that economy going.

So, we have a lowly shepherd as an image for God. And one lost sheep as an image of – well – us, or any of those who are considered sinners for whatever reason.

And Jesus ends that parable with saying that when the shepherd found the lost sheep he called all his shepherd buddies to come and celebrate with him, rejoicing over that one lamb that had been found.

And what about the other story? It's even more incredible because Jesus uses a woman as the metaphor for God! Now he's really going too far. This should push the Scribes and Pharisees over the top!

This woman is probably a poor woman, most likely a single woman – maybe a widow. Otherwise, she might not be quite as interested in seeking out one small coin, when she had 9 others, after all.

But Jesus says she is determined to find that coin – it was a drachma – which is worth a whole day's wage. She could not afford to lose that much money.

So she lit a lamp and she got her broom and she started sweeping the entire house, carefully searching for that one small coin. She was determined to find it, and when she finally did, what did she do? She called over her friends and neighbors and threw a party! For one small coin!

The point, Jesus says, is that God is like this – God doesn't just sit on some cushy soft cloud, waiting for people who are lost to come to God. Uh huh. God is actively searching, seeking for even that one who is lost.

And Jesus says – there is a big party in heaven – all the angels are rejoicing – dancing and singing and playing their harps (well, that's my interpretation). They are having a heavenly party over the one who has repented, the one who was lost and is now found and has come home to God. (What does repent mean? Turned around; going a new direction; changing your mind.)

Down on earth, it appears to be different. No parties here! Just scowls from the religious, legal authorities. How dare God associate his holiness with them! How dare he show grace and love and mercy and friendship with those – unclean sinners!

Oh yeah, it causes a stir when things that we think should be one way, turn out to be different. When we have in our mind a belief that is so set, it shakes us up – it makes us hot under the collar mad – when Jesus comes along and turns it all upside down. How dare he do that to our worn out set of rules!

So who are the lost who need to be found by a God who searches and won't give up looking?

Who are the sinners whom heaven throws a party over when they repent?

We Church people have a tendency to hold a view of what sin is in our minds. Admit it. You know we do!

Some churches view certain things as sin where others might not, too. Depending on what denomination we are in – or what non-denomination we have decided to attend, we might see things different.

Some churches say that dancing is a sin. It shows all kinds of evil moves and leads to all sorts of carnal pleasures. Probably true for some, but is dancing itself a sin? Does that mean David who danced for the Lord with delight (in his birthday suit) was sinning?

Some believe that playing cards – any cards is sinful. I wonder if the game “Go Fish” that I have played more times than I can count, with my grandchildren, is a sin.

For some, women showing bare arms, or cutting their hair, or wearing make up or, God forbid, teaching the opposite sex about God – yes, they are sinning.

Some look at sin that way. Presbyterians tend to see it differently.

Of course, we look at things that go against the 10 commandments as sin – murder, stealing, adultery, taking God's name in vain as sin.

But consider this - While our actions often are sinful, what about the sins of our hearts and minds? What about putting ourselves before others, being self-centered, hating others, and not even regarding God's love for us, never talking to God, never acknowledging His presence or his love?

What about being so legalistic that we judge others and can't see the hardness of our own hearts? What about not forgiving and being angry – so

angry that we don't even want God to forgive our enemies or those we have determined are sinners?

I think we all know that in some way, we are the sinners. We are the lost – or we have been. And that's the beauty of it all. We know that God has never forgotten us, never given up on us, always has searched for us until we have been found.

And that doesn't just mean those of us who once did not know God but now we do. It means that all of us – at times – feel somehow lost. Because we are sinners, we do have need to repent – not just once and for all, but over time at different times in our lives.

Oh, the joy of knowing forgiveness. Oh the grace that floods our hearts when we are back in a safe place – that place that is the closeness, the joy, the very heart of God.

And to know that we are – every single little one of us - each and every time we are found – cause for a great party in heaven. Rejoicing and celebrating.

God, the Shepherd – God, yes – even God, the woman – seeks until every lost one is found. Not one of us is too small, too insignificant, too unworthy to be found and loved and welcomed into the fold of God.

Thanks be to God for loving us, for seeking us, for giving us life – abundant, transforming, forgiving, joyous life.

May we have the soft heart of this God of mercy and grace, so that, just as God sees others as completely worthy of His grace, we too, will see all people through His loving eyes.

Amen.