

teacher. Some of those, maybe all of them, are probably things you've never explored before; things you assumed were for other people. But I hope you'll come hear briefly from each practitioner and then chat with them at the fair to learn more. And to discover how each of these things can be another piece of the puzzle in your spiritual life, in addition to worship, prayer, Bible study, meditation, or whatever else makes you feel whole. Maybe what you learn won't even be for you. Maybe it will be for a friend who needs you to be their stack of stones, their guidepost to help them recover their joy and delight so they can celebrate God's blessings once again.

When the shepherd finds that one missing sheep there is utter joy. He hoists the sheep up on his shoulders like a dad playfully giving his toddler a piggyback ride. He calls to his friends and invites them to join the celebration too. "Rejoice with me," he says "because what was lost has been found!" Christopher H. Edmonton writes, "When the lost is found, the heart explodes with joy. It is joy so loud and rejoicing so strong that even the angels take note...Jesus is offering a grand invitation to a fiesta of joy, saying all the while, "Rejoice with me."¹

Can you let yourself really imagine what that feels like—a fiesta of joy? A celebration of friends and neighbors that draws people together? A party with the angels? Can you allow yourself to imagine recovering such a feeling of joy and celebrating it so fully? God urges us toward that kind of rejoicing; it doesn't need to happen separate from our faith, it can be fully a part of it. Joy can be so very holy, just like the baptism today reminded us.

But perhaps even more important than our own joy down in our hearts, is God's rejoicing over us. The parable Jesus told implied that the coin and the sheep were like people. They represented sinners whose lives changed and who turned toward God in a new way. Sinners. That's not meant to be derogatory, that's just reality. Sinners means humans; you and me, everyone of us. Which means God wants to find and rejoice over people just like us who are turning our lives toward God. There will be times when no matter what stacks of stones we see or what methods we try, we struggle to find our joy. And in those times, God rejoices over us. God does the celebrating for us when we can't do it ourselves.

Joy is indeed down in our hearts. Sometimes it's there, bursting forth into happiness and celebration and something like a party, as we follow Jesus gladly. Sometimes it is tucked deep inside, waiting for a time when it can emerge. Other times, our joy feels completely hidden from us. But God is the one who planted it there, deep down inside us. So God can also help us to find it again. And when we do, God will already be singing out with rejoicing, ready to welcome us to that joyful celebration!

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

1 Christopher H. Edmonton, "Luke 15:1-10, Homiletical Perspective," Feasting on the Gospels, 85.

September 11, 2022

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

"I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Luke 15:1-10

When I was little, Sunday school always started with 15 minutes of singing. Often my mom led the songs with her auto harp and many of those are tunes that still stick in my head. Do you remember this one?

I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart, (where?) down in my heart (where?) Down in my heart.

I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart, to stay.

And I'm so happy, so very happy, I have the love of Jesus in my heart.

And I'm so happy, so very happy, I have the love of Jesus in my heart.

It's a joy-filled song. And today, as we embark on a month of thinking about our spiritual health and mental wellness, we start with the concept of joy. The song talks about both joy and happiness. I think we use them pretty interchangeably. But the two are different. Especially in our spiritual lives. Happiness is something that we feel for a little while that's related to an external experience. When that experience is gone, our happiness may go away, too. Joy is a deeper sense of gratitude and delight. It's rooted in a recognition and celebration of God's blessings, which don't come and go; they are eternal. Therefore, joy is meant to be down in our hearts, and there to stay.

But *we* are human. And so *our* joy tends to ebb and flow. We have times where we are so in tune with God and aware of God's blessings in our lives—then, our joy deepens. We have other times where grief or loneliness, pain or stress beat us down and begin to steal our joy. In those times, we may not feel spiritually or mentally well. And our hearts long to recover the joy we've lost.

In the scripture, something important, something of value has been lost. A sheep. A coin. When our joy goes missing, we may not, at first, realize its value. We go about our business, doing what needs to be done. We assume this is just how life feels now. And our faith hasn't always pointed to joy as a necessary spiritual value. We focus on peace, love, repentance, forgiveness. Presbyterians are not known for joy, even though we're known for stressing other wonderful qualities like grace and gratitude. Joy *is* of incredible value in our spiritual lives though; not to mention for our mental health. There are a bunch of stories in the Bible that focus on celebrations and parties given

to rejoice in life regained after it seemed like all was lost; and hospitality so generous that all are welcome.. Clearly, Jesus knew that rejoicing was an important part of life. That joy Jesus spoke of functions like a cycle. When we live with joy, we can focus on God's goodness and God's action in our lives. And when we realize God's goodness and God's activity, that builds our joy and delight in living even more. Joy deep down in our hearts makes joy bubble over in our daily living. That doesn't mean being happy-go-lucky or carefree or Pollyanna-ish. It means being centered, balanced, aware, attuned, hopeful - about what God is up to around us and that God is present within us.

The shepherd lost one single sheep out of ninety-nine. The scripture asks a question like there is an obvious answer: "which one of you doesn't leave the ninety-nine and go after the one that's lost?" Well, I don't know. I probably would not. I'd call a friend to see if they could go look; or see if they could stay with the ninety-nine while I went on the hunt for the one. If the terrain was rocky and it was hot, maybe I'd just let that one little lamb go as the cost of doing business with sheep. But Jesus is clear that *every* sheep is worth finding. Even and especially the ones that have gotten lost.

Even when we understand the value and importance of joy in our lives, this particular moment seems a hard one for maintaining our joy. We've lost loved ones. A study last week found that worldwide, about 10 million children have so far lost a caregiver due to the Covid pandemic. We may look out at the world and struggle to feel hope for the future. They're calling this the 'summer of climate crises' and every day we're losing time to change that domino effect for coming generations. There's the everyday stuff that steals our joy in dribs and drabs, too. Overbooked schedules, helping family members, traveling to make up for lost pandemic time, demands at work, illness and poor health. The joy may be draining away, whether it happened suddenly or so gradually that we barely noticed until it was gone.

But there is Jesus telling us that what has been lost is worth finding. Even if it's been long gone, like the one sheep, it is worth finding once again. Even if you have no idea where to start looking, go on the hunt. Even if you have to leave behind some other very important matters for a little while. Go on the search. Joy matters. Noticing God's eternal blessings matters for how we live. That's true because each person, each sinner, each of us, is worthy of being found.

The search is the hardest part. Sometimes, we feel we have already been searching for days, weeks, years. We find ourselves with a flashlight, head poking under the couch cushions, covered in dust bunnies looking for where that joy could possibly be hiding. Or we're frustrated to be in the midst of a long slog in the wilderness searching for how to recover ourselves, our identity, our sense of joy in life, and we're just too tired to even turn over another rock. In that case, to be told to go look for joy feels like an insult, not an invitation.

The parable doesn't give a quick answer about how to recover what's been

lost. But it does imply that anything and anyone who seems lost, no matter how far gone, can be found. Jesus implies that joy is the end of the story. You've probably noticed the stack of stones in the chancel today. It's the same as the stones in our logo for this worship series. Stacks of stones have many meanings. One of which is to mark the way, as if on a trail through the woods. The stones function as a signpost so that when you are lost, you can find your way again. When I was in Glacier National Park last summer, I went on a horseback riding excursion for the first time ever. Thankfully, I was not alone or lost on the adventure. But as we turned down one muddy trail, a series of stone stacks appeared. People had made them over the years to mark the path, perhaps. But also to mark the beauty of the place. Perhaps to show how they had encountered something holy there. Maybe they even found something in that place of beauty, which had long seemed lost. That's not the only thing the stones mean. The stacks also represent balance; a modern symbol of wellness and wholeness in our lives. The practice of making those small towers can be a spiritual one. Some set them up as a kind of altar; a way to mark a holy spot, an encounter with God, or as a deep recognition of God's blessings. Which is, of course, one definition of joy—gratitude and delight in God's eternal blessings.

When we are in a search for something important we've lost, like the shepherd or the woman, we might notice simple signs that help us find our way. The stack of stones on our path might not be as obvious as a glint of metal under the couch cushion. But perhaps our stones are a glimpse of something that used to bring us hope and fulfillment; a snippet of a hymn that warms our heart; a whiff of something sweet that reminds us what it felt like to be fully loved. The stones could be something less warm and fuzzy, too. Or a lot simpler. A clean kitchen that reminds us of a fresh start in the morning. Ten minutes sitting on the porch in the evening as the summer light turns to fall. Taking care of something we've been putting off—a doctor appointment, a phone call, reaching out for some help that we need—all of which remind us of our own worth. When we notice these things, we can see them as the stack of stones they are; a simple guidepost toward the joy we are searching for.

Sometimes no stack of stones appears. Despite our searching, we cannot seem to find what has been lost. We need help to recover our joy. Next week after the 10:30 service, we have one opportunity to do that at the *It is Well* fair. Downstairs in Fellowship Hall we'll have an opportunity to discover new ways to seek out the joy and balance and wholeness that might be missing in our lives. A number of practitioners from inside and outside the congregation will take part and I hope you'll take a chance to visit and talk with them, even if you're not sure this is your kind of thing. We'll have Susan Bakker from Lillybrook Counseling. Joelle Jarrait offering guidance for labyrinth walking. Christian yoga teachers. A way to take a spiritual pilgrimage right here in Michigan. Information about our own Stephen Ministers. Even a Tai Chi