

“The Celebration of One!”

Luke 15:22-24

Grace to you and Peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Gospel reading this morning tells the story of the Prodigal Son, but for several of us, I think its better titled “The merciful and loving father.”

Based on this reading, Phillip Yancey in his book “What’s so Amazing About Grace” re-tells this story but with almost present-day facts. The story of a young girl.

“A young girl grows up on a cherry orchard just above Traverse City, Michigan. Her parents, a bit old-fashioned, tend to overreact to her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the length of her skirts.

They ground her a few times, and she rages inside. “I hate you!” she screams at her dad one night, after an argument. That that night she acts on a plan she has been mentally rehearsing many times. She runs away to Detroit.

She has visited Detroit only once before, on a bus trip with her church youth group. She decided to go there, a place where her parents would not look for her.

On the second day there she meets a man who drives the biggest car she’s ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch, and arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she’s ever felt before.

She was right all along, she decides: her parents were keeping her from all the fun. The good life continues for a month, two months, a year.

The man with the big car—she calls him "Boss"—teaches her a few things of the trade. Since she's underage, men pay a premium for her. She lives in a penthouse and orders room service whenever she wants.

Occasionally she thinks about the folks back home, but their lives now seem so boring and provincial that she can hardly believe she grew up there.

She had a brief scare when she saw her picture on the back of a milk carton with the headline, "Have you seen this child?" But by now with blond hair, and all the makeup and body-piercing jewelry she wears, nobody would mistake her for a child.

After a year, illness begins to appear, the boss turns mean, and before she knows it, she's out on the street without a penny to her name.

She still turns a couple of tricks a night, but they don't pay much, and all the money goes to support her habit. When winter blows in she finds herself sleeping on metal grates outside the big department stores.

"Sleeping" is the wrong word--a teenage girl at night in downtown Detroit can never relax her guard. Dark bands circle her eyes. Her cough worsens.

One night, as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything about her life looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She feels like a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. She begins to whimper. Her pockets are empty and she's hungry. She needs a fix.

She pulls her legs tight underneath her and shivers under the newspapers she's piled atop her coat. Something brings up in her mind a memory of her old home, and how sweet it was. "God, why did I leave?" she says to herself, and pain stabs at her heart. "My dog back home eats

better than I do now.” She’s sobbing, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

She calls home three times, and three times she gets the answering machine. The third time she left a message: "Dad, Mom, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home! I'm catching a bus up your way, and it'll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well, I guess I'll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada."

It takes about seven hours for a bus to get to Traverse City, and during that time she realizes the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? Shouldn't she have waited another day or so until she could talk to them?

Even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

Her thoughts bounce back and forth between those worries and the speech she is preparing for her father. "Dad, I'm sorry. I know I was wrong. It's not your fault, it's all mine. Dad, can you forgive me?" Her throat tightening even as she rehearses them. She hasn't apologized to anyone in years.

When the bus finally rolls into the station, its air brakes hissing in protest, the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all we have here." Well, fifteen minutes that's all she had to decide her life.

She checks herself in a compact mirror, smooths her hair, and licks the lipstick off her teeth. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingertips and wonders if her parents will notice—if they're there of course!

She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect, and not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepare her for what she sees.

There, in the concrete-walls-and-plastic-chairs bus terminal in Traverse City, Michigan, stands a group of 40 brothers and sisters and great-aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and great-grandmother to boot.

They are all wearing ridiculous-looking party hats and blowing noisemakers and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a computer-generated banner that reads "Welcome home!"

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her dad. She looks through tears and begins the memorized speech, "Dad, I'm sorry. I know . . ." He interrupts her. "Hush, child. We've got no time for that. No time for apologies. You'll be late for the party. A banquet's waiting for you at home."

She was dead now she is alive; she was lost now she was found! A wonderful story of one Girl, or one son. The story of one! But a celebration of one doesn't sound right. But that is exactly what seems to happen in the whole chapter 15 of Luke's gospel.

In the ear of his opponents the religious leaders of his time who were criticizing him for eating and fellowshiping with the lost who they, the leaders taught to avoid, so Jesus points to them the value they have, so he tells several stories of One, and not just stories, but celebration stories.

I. Celebration of One...lost sheep...lost coin...lost son

A Celebration of One! A celebration of that or the one who was lost and is found. There is much rejoicing and partying because the lost is found.

The chapter begins with the story of a lost sheep, “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?” Jesus says.

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? He adds. Then continues with the story of the lost son.

100 sheep, 10 coins, 2 sons, yet one is missing. Now whether that one was lost by accident, misplaced even in the very house of the owner, or lost by willful disobedience . . . Jesus stresses the importance of that one! This singular lost item is worthwhile, is important, and merits an extensive search. And when it is found a celebration of one happens.

Now, of course in the story of the lost son, repentance is the key for that celebration to happen. A new and radical repentance indeed. And all repentance requires is to simply listen to the call and be found. For all of us there is a search and a call to come home by their savior, by Jesus Christ. Every single one of these is important. Every single lost sinner and hardened moralist or know it all, today, need just heed the call of Jesus and be found by His grace poured out from the cross. And when they are found a celebration of one happens.

The call of repentance falls upon both the sinner and the Pharisee alike. Now both certainly live different lives and have sinned for different reasons.

The sinner has simply decided that no matter what God says or does, his or her way is better and is bent upon going that way. Whether it be drugs, sex, work schedules, or feeling justified to sleep in on a Sunday morning, these have separated themselves from God.

The Pharisee revels in importance. The power and standing in the community really erects a holy wall between them and the people. Perfection becomes the sole goal of life. Yet in the irony of that perfection, isolation is the result. Self-dependence and self-righteousness are waiting to take over.

It has to be easy to put ourselves in the places of these hearers, right? And well we should, for in seeing the sin in our lives we can see all the more the greatness, the freedom, and the love of God that wants to find us and wash that sin from us and purify our hearts and minds. For in that freedom of the Gospel, revisited even daily in our own lives, we become much more able to celebrate the lives that God has given and the moments therein.

And if we are able to celebrate the grace of Jesus Christ, then freedom to celebrate for those who are lost will be attainable and even become a healthy burden for us. See, when the Shepherd locates that sheep, he shoulders the sheep and bears the burden of taking that sheep home.

The woman of the house tears apart the house, sweeping and lighting the dusty corners in search of that lost coin.

And the father scans the horizon with a burden to see upon that road the silhouette of his son. And when he sees it, he without hesitation runs after him to welcome him. And rejoicing takes over.

The celebration of one . . . a celebration of the one home, but also the community now celebrates the return of the lost with joy and feasting.

The celebration of one...community. Rejoicing is inspired by the restoration of that which was lost and now is found. The community comes

together to lift up and praise God and celebrate together the restoration of the lost.

I love the progression here of the parables. From sheep to coin to son.

A shepherd searches out the sheep—a sign of reaching out to the helpless and lost of the community . . .

A woman sweeps her house—maybe here in our house right now there are those that are lost and need to be reached out to . . .

Notice both men and women are involved in the search. And don't forget the relevance of the lost son . . . who of us does not have a child, or at least are a child that can imagine the feeling of being separated and lost in sin?

May we as a community celebrate as one. May we as a community have a celebration of one like that in Luke 15.

Each one found incites a celebration: Rejoice with me, for the one that was lost is found. “But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.’²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.”

Notice what the text says, “they began to Celebrate.” The celebration of one...is the celebration of the Kingdom of God

Jesus says (Luke 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.” The angels have a party in heaven for one sinner who repents. Why?

Because Jesus says: “It is... fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother or sister, was dead, and is alive; he or she was lost, and is found.”

Friends, each and every person around us, is precious in God’s eyes, they need to hear the Gospel, the truth of Jesus and the price paid for their life on Calvary. Precious to the Father who sent Him, Precious to the Son who died and lives for them, Precious to the Spirit who lives in them by baptism and speaks on behalf of them and us.

And, the truth is that Heaven rejoices when one sinner repents and finds eternal life in the Son. And may we too rejoice for the lost who are found, may we celebrate them, each one of them, let’s have a celebration of one...one sheep...one coin...one son - each soul is worth it. A celebration of one...community coming together because of restoration.

A celebration of one...Kingdom of God that erupts in joy when that one lost person repents and is welcomed Home.

In Jesus Name.

Amen.