

1 Timothy 1:12-17 ~ Luke 15:1-10

One Coin Found!

14th after Pentecost ~ Receiving of New Members ~ Stewardship of Time & Talent

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The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction

Within the 15th chapter of Luke, the little story about the lost coin is the one that usually gets swept aside. Lodged between the more memorable image of the shepherd looking for the lost sheep (etched more pervasively through scripture: “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want,” “I am the Good Shepherd,” or “All we like sheep have gone astray” just for starters) then followed immediately by the compelling, heart rending, heart mending story of the Lost Son, you know the one about the second wayward prodigal son who at comes back home after squandering his inheritance on wine, women and song. Many of us know that one. It is the third of the three “Lost” stories in the 15th chapter of Luke. We thrill at the moment when the father is scanning the horizon, sees his broken boy making his way home, runs to him and embraces him. Then, just like the first two stories, the father quickly acts on his joy and begins preparations for a big celebration: deciding immediately to kill the fatted calf (top of the line party food), because his lost boy has been found.

And everybody in that story joined the celebration, the singing and dancing... except the elder son who stayed home and did everything right. He is the grumbler in this third story that Jesus is telling the grumbling church leaders who don’t like the look of the people Jesus is keeping company with. The ones who are neither rejoicing nor celebrating the colorful spectacle of the lost and despised people at table with Jesus.

Although we may be expecting to hear that story of the Prodigal and his brother when we open our Bibles to Luke 15, we won’t be reading that one today. This morning it is the woman with the lamp and the broom, searching for the lost coin, who has something to teach us. Something about God. And something about church. Something about the heart of true church. By whom and for what we are EKKLESIA, the Greek word for church, which our new members know, literally translated means “to be called out.” Or perhaps another good translation for Ekklesia, is “to be found” –like the sheep and the coin and the son in Jesus’ three-in-a-row “lost” stories. We are going to focus on the lost coin story today. In it Jesus gifts us with an image of God that is quite mortal and quite visible: A woman with a lamp and a broom. What can she teach us about God’s love and about true church? Let us listen now for the voice of God within the words of scripture as it is written in Luke 15.

Sermon:

I think we all know *how* to celebrate. We gather friends and family together. We eat. We drink. We talk. We may give gifts and cards. And we play games. Especially in Wisconsin. Where two or more are gathered: beer and cards and good cheer. Ready to party. Will the Packers beat the Minnesota Vikings (did I get that right?) today? Get the beer and brats ready. The Brewers beat the St. Louis Cardinals yesterday, yay! And we’ll see what they do this afternoon: get together and watch the action. In any case: we will be ready to celebrate.

The joy becomes real. The rejoicing expands when we celebrate together. I think we all know this, too. What Jesus is teaching us here is the part that the grumblers in the story don't know. And the part that we have trouble with, too. Not the *how* to celebrate, but the *when* to celebrate. That is, what on earth causes God to celebrate. In the seven verses it takes for Jesus to tell these two "lost" parables, (no birthdays, graduations or weddings in sight) he uses the word for "joy" or "rejoice" five times. We may like to celebrate annual milestones as well as the victories of our favorite sports teams, and that is all well and good. But our God rejoices most, it seems, over finding the lost. Saving, healing, embracing the last, the least, and the lost. Now that's a reason for beer and brats with our awesome God.

There's something else about a story about a lost coin. Since coins don't sin or runaway or repent on their own steam (as a sheep or a young boy might), the parable of the lost coin most clearly teaches us that the being found part is what God does. This is a story about being found--something we cannot do for ourselves, that's why we call it grace and it is amazing. If we are Christ followers, we are "called out" to search the corners, seek the last, the least, and the lost. This is hard work. It goes against our grain. We'd rather "unfriend" or "unfollow" people that bother us, or offend us. But here's the truth about God's love. Here's where the rubber meets the road. As Dorothy Day, social activist and servant of God wrote, "I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least."ⁱⁱ

Being found by God—that's God's work. That what Christ did on the cross for us, that's we could not do for ourselves. Our work, our call is to let ourselves be found, so that we can take up our broom, like the woman in the story and look for the lost coins. There are so many of them, hidden in plain sight. Yes, every person, of infinite value in God's eyes. Whether we like them or not. Whether we agree with them or not. Although we believe every person was created in the image of God, many people who do not know that. As Emmy Kegler, Lutheran Pastor in Minneapolis, author, and editor of "Queer Grace" has written in her book, *One Coin Found*, "I am found by a divine love that is expansive. Every time I have reached the edge of how far I believed love could go, I have found myself instead standing in the middle of where love has already been. Love is not up for in-groups and out-groups, for tents that can only stretch so far or tables that can only seat so many. Love keeps going... Love has no tolerance for intolerance."ⁱⁱⁱ

This is hard work. Apart from Christ we'd rather grumble. Without our church community to figure out together how to live in the light of this woman's lamp and the energy of her stretching, seeking broom, we could choose otherwise. I believe this is why we are here, seeking to follow the One that has found us. Seeking to be a true church. As Emmy Kegler defines it, "True church is a community that loves us into being and transforms us. In church we can discover, "This expansive impossibility of inherent worth is etched on the heart of every one of us."^{iv} That's EKKLESIA, or being a true church. We are here because we have been found or want to be found. God has found seven new members this day: called and found, and ready to join our "search and rescue" team that is FPC.

Today, not only our new members but everyone is invited to consider where they are putting their energy: their time and talent. Where are we putting our energy? Our time and our talent? You can answer that question by completing and turning in this year's "Skills and Interest" Inventory. One other thing this passage highlights: The more grumbling, resenting, judging we do, the less energy and time we have to let God employ our talents for the restoration work to which we are all called.

We know how to celebrate. But do we know when to celebrate with God the moments that thrill our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sustainer? Jesus gave us a big clue with these stories he made up for the very unmerry grumblers. But it is also one we are still learning. Otherwise we may lose the chance, the moment to do God's redeeming, restoring, rescue work.

Sometimes we don't realize when it's time to kill the fatted calf. We wait for the perfect moment, another benchmark. "When should you and when should you not kill the fatted calf? Do you wait for the right and perfect time to celebrate, or do you let the celebration transform the imperfection of the moment?" That is the question that Lillian Daniel poses in her book, *When Spiritual But Religious is not Enough*. Then she goes on to tell this story:

"What are you waiting for?" the little girl asked her mother. "When are we ever going to use our fancy china?" She had been asking her mother why they never ate in the formal dining room, why they never used the china her parents had received for their wedding, why they never pulled out the silver. "That's for special occasion," her mother replied, and looked sternly at her. "Don't ever touch this..." When they did occasionally pull out the good china, it was for some formal meal that seemed stripped of joy. The family seemed to want these occasions to end quickly. They did not feel special... Her mother worried that someone would drop a plate. "Those plates are irreplaceable," she said. "They don't make that pattern anymore. The girl stopped asking her mother to get out the good china. It wasn't worth it.

When she married, the young woman didn't get herself any fancy china. What was the point? But after a few years, she inherited her mother's. And she vowed she would actually use it. But with a baby, then a toddler, and the chaos of everyday life, the good china got put away until one day her own small daughter noticed it in the cupboard and asked, "Wow, can we use this tonight?" And before she could catch herself, the mother said, "No, it's for a special occasion. Don't touch it."

"Isn't today a special occasion?" the little girl asked. She was too young to know that adults like to save up and wait for such things. She was too young to have learned that you have to earn them.

And her mother stopped and looked around her. The kitchen was covered in dirty pots and pans from an afternoon of kids baking and playing at the house. The dog was once again eating out of the dishwasher. Her husband had just walked in and was grabbing a beer after a long commute, but she still needed to get some strange bubbling plastic container out of the microwave and its contents into her daughter's stomach before youth group at church, and

after that she still had twenty or thirty e-mails to catch up on before Wednesday night was done.

But the messy house had been full of laughter. It held more spirit and joy than anything she had known as a child, because sometimes the people with the coldest parents end up with a particular gift for warming a nest...She looked at her daughter, changing and growing so quickly, and realized that her presence in this house was temporary...and said to herself, "But that child is irreplaceable. They don't make that pattern anymore."

She pulled out some plates from the dusty set of good china and put them out on the messy kitchen counter...She looked her daughter in the eye and said, "You're right, this is a very special occasion." And together they set the table with the same love that God sets the table for you and for me, and for all the rest of her prodigal, irresponsible, precious, and irreplaceable children. That is the story that Jesus told the people who criticized him for sitting at the table with sinners."^v The story of when God celebrates and why.

For God, the party begins anytime and anywhere and anyhow the lost, the last, and the least are found.

ⁱ The title of my sermon was inspired by Emmy Kegler's book title, *One Coin Found: How God's Love Stretches to the Margins*. See below for the full reference.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dorothy Day as quoted in Emmy Kegler, *One Coin Found*, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2019), p.158.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p.176.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, pp.185 and 179.

^v Lillian Daniel, *When Spiritual But Religious Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church*, (Jericho Books: New York, NY, 2013), p.110-113.