

**Dec 20/21, 2008**  
**Welcoming (Advent 4)**  
**Luke 15**  
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There's this streetlight in the neighborhood. It's across the street from the church and it's in the middle of the block ... I mean in the middle of the block, like in somebody's backyard. When it's dark outside and I leave the church out the north door, the door nearest to my house, the light comes on. Always. Without fail. For 10 years now. It's spooky. I've come to believe that it knows when I'm leaving the building and gets ready to light up the darkness purely for my comfort and safety. I've come to believe that it senses my presence; it must smell me or gauge my body temperature, even though it's more than a ½ block away. I don't even walk on that side of the street, but it comes on ... *every time I walk by*. It's spooky. But you know what? It's also very welcoming ... as if to say, welcome to the neighborhood. It does leave me with a feeling of comfort, even if it is a little spooky.

Remember the Motel 6 tag-line, with Tom Bodett: "We'll leave the light on for you." That's how it feels in my neighborhood. We'll leave the light on for you.

So, welcome ... welcome to the neighborhood ... (turn the light on)

This is the fourth weekend in Advent and our Advent theme today is "welcoming." Our sermon series for Advent has been all about having a party ... Christmas being the big party! 1. We decide, 2. we invite, 3. we

prepare and 4. we welcome. We open the door. We turn on the light. We lay out the welcome mat. We celebrate when the guests begin to arrive.

Chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel is all about having a party. We remember the chapter because of the Prodigal Son story, one of the most famous stories in scripture – and rightfully so. It's a wonderful story about two lost sons and a father who finds them both, each in a different way. But earlier in the chapter, there are two other stories about some lost items: a sheep and a coin. It seems that Chapter 15 is Luke's Lost and Found department.

Chapter 15 begins by saying that the critics sneered, "This man, this Jesus, receives sinners and eats with them, that is, parties with them."

It reminds us of a moment, elsewhere in the gospels, where his critics comes to Jesus and say, "the disciples of John the Baptist fast often and say long prayers. But your disciples are always eating, drinking, and partying." In other words, we can tell the disciples of John the Baptist are religious because they look so miserable! But as for your disciples, Jesus, why do they always party?

In response, Jesus tells stories ... stories we find in the Lost & Found department of Luke 15.

"Which one of you, if he has 100 sheep, and one strays from the flock, will not leave the 99 sheep in the wilderness – vulnerable to the wildlife, wandering off, and other all manner of mischief – and go out and beat the bushes until you find your one lost sheep. Then will you not put the sheep

on your shoulders, just as if you are carrying a newly found child, and when you see your friends, will you not cry out, “Come party with me! I have found my sheep!”

Now which one of you would not do that?

And which one of you, like a woman who has lost a quarter, will you not be like that woman and rip up all the carpet in your living room, move all of the furniture out into the front yard, then move all of the heavy appliances out of the kitchen into the front yard and search relentlessly until you have found that quarter? And when she has found the quarter, she comes running out into the yard, calling to everyone up and down the street, “come party with me! I found my quarter!”

Now which one of you would not do that?

I was lost. I was a 2<sup>nd</sup> year seminarian studying Hebrew. United Methodist students preparing for ministry are not required to learn a biblical language, but I thought it be fun. Oy vey. fun. You know, there are just some people in this world whose brains are wired for different languages ... not mine. I only succeeded in Hebrew because of my Hebrew professor, Dr. Phyllis Bird. I was just your average Hebrew student in the beginning, but as time went on, my friend Cathy and I became Phyllis’ special project. We became her project because many of the other students in the class were dropping out. It was hard and if you didn’t need the credit to graduate, why bother taking the class? (Can you believe some people thought it would be fun?) Phyllis so desperately wanted us to learn and love the language, that she

searched us out. During a winter term, she literally put her life on hold and was available for us at any hour of the day or night. Phyllis isn't a night owl ... and Cathy & I usually started studying at about midnight ... but Phyllis would stay up with us in the library, in her office, at the IHop, by telephone or email, helping us with our Hebrew. Oh, she didn't make it easy. It was very challenging and we had to work hard to learn the language and all the rules of the language. The day after our final exam, Phyllis – a fairly timid and shy woman – ran through the halls of the seminary, waving our blue books, yelling, “I'm going to have the biggest party this seminary's ever seen and everyone's invited! My two lost students have been 'found' and have received the highest grades in the class.”

... All because Phyllis “found” us when we were lost.

Now which one of you will do this?

The two parties mentioned in scripture, when the shepherd celebrates after finding the lost sheep, and the woman parties after finding the lost coin, prepare us for the most outrageous party of them all – the party which is thrown by the father upon the return of his lost boy.

When the older brother, working out in the field, hears all the music up at the big house, he says to a servant, “what's going on? And why are you all dressed up? You look like you're going to a party.”

The servant replies, “I am! Your brother has come home and your dad’s throwing a whopper of a party ... and we’re all invited. We all have the night off!”

“A party?” says the older brother. “How does that old man expect me to keep this farm in operation when he goes and throws a party?”

The father replies “Save the self-righteous speeches for someone who cares. Come on, relax, we’re going to have a party. The lost has been found.”

Jesus says, when just one of these lost – the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost boy – comes home to heaven, heaven goes wild.

In the beginning of chapter 15 of Luke, tax collectors and sinners are gathering ‘round Jesus to listen to his words, because in his words he told them how much God loves them. The Pharisees and the scribes, they just don’t get it. They criticize Jesus for hanging out with the wrong crowd.

We’d better hope that Jesus is willing to hang around and eat with the wrong crowd because that’s us – every one of us – we’re all tax collectors and sinners. And if Jesus will break bread with you, if Jesus will break bread with me, he’ll break bread with anyone.

We’re all lost. Hopelessly lost. Miserably lost ... most of the time. And God keeps coming back to find us. God keeps coming back to find us. God is like a shepherd who searches diligently for a lost, precious sheep. God is like a woman who searches carefully for her lost precious coin. God is like

Phyllis Bird, who doesn't allow a student to get lost between the cracks.  
God is the parent welcoming home the lost child.

That's the way God is. And every so often, we think that maybe God has given up on us. We think that God has finally given up on trying to get through to us. But the story from Luke tells us differently. Jesus tells us clearly of God's forever wanting to find us.

Finding the lost sheep, finding the lost coin, the homecoming of the lost boy brought great joy in heaven, and created a community of joy on earth - the church.

And what is church? More often than not, we have to be reminded of what the church is.

The Church is not a club for the found but a haven for the lost.

The Church does not exist to comfort the saved but to save the sinner.

The Church is not meant to serve its members but to bind up the broken-hearted, to quench the thirst of the parched, to befriend the friendless, to free the oppressed.

We in the church sometimes forget that. Since God has invited the likes of you and me to party with Jesus, it really does seem the least that we can do to have a "welcome home" party for others. It really does seem that the least we can do is to join God in the search until the good shepherd brings all the

sheep into the fold, until every lost coin is safely tucked away in the purse of God. It really does seem that the least we can do is celebrate when our brothers and sisters come home.

Advent is the season of preparation and anticipation. We've planned, prepared, invited, and we've turned the light on.

For four weeks we have prayed that God will open our church doors. We have prayed that God will open our homes. We have prayed that God open our hearts. What in God's name will we do when God answers our prayers?

Christmas is coming, whether we're ready or not. The party will happen, not because we deserve it, but because Jesus finds us ... again. Jesus comes to us ... not because we're good Christians, but because we're God's people.

God says: I'll leave the light on for you. Amen.