

Victory of the Lamb
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August 16, 2020
Series: The One
Theme: Join Jesus' party

If feels like we missed out on our summer this year because we missed out on all the normal festivals and parties. Milwaukee is a city of parties and festivals. We start the summer by going to graduation parties and weddings. Next, we listen to music at Summerfest. Later on in the summer, we eat a cream puff at the State Fair. Then we finish the summer tailgating before a Brewer's game. But none of that happened this year, so it feels like we missed out on our summer because we missed out on all the parties.

As I studied God's Word this week, I came the conclusion that Jesus is always throwing a party, even and especially in the pandemic. Jesus hasn't cancelled his party. But my concern is that we are missing out on the party that Jesus is throwing because we don't approve of what Jesus is doing. We are not excited about his party.

We are continuing our sermon series called **The One**. In this series, we will see that Jesus wants us to focus on the one person he is putting in our lives. In fact, we will see to that Jesus is planning a party for the one person in our lives. Here is the question I want you to answer by the end of this sermon: **Will you be excited to participate in Jesus' party?**

To answer that question we are going to look again at Luke 15. Pastor Bill introduced us to this text last week. And in the opening verse, Jesus is throwing a party. Luke 15:1 says, **Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.** A few outcasts and lowlives were gathering around Jesus to listen to Jesus. These were people who had screwed up their lives by hurting others. There were tax collectors, motivated by greed, who had cheated their fellow Jews out of money. There were prostitutes who had destroyed families with their profession. Their lives were a mess. They didn't go to church. They didn't keep up their yard. They always seemed to be getting into trouble. And Jesus was having a party with them. It might not look like a party to us, but the people in Jesus' day knew what was going on.

Luke goes on, **But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."** (Luke 15:2). The Pharisees and teachers of the law were the good, upstanding, churchgoing, citizens. They were good neighbors, who voted the right way and took care of their lawn the right way. They gave generously to the church. And served faithfully on many boards and committees.

And they "muttered". They grumbled and complained. They were angry and frustrated. Why? Jesus was welcoming *sinners* and *eating with them*. In their contempt, they couldn't even mention Jesus' name. The just said, "this one is eating with them." Now the words "eat with" is actually one word in the Greek. It doesn't just mean to shove food in your mouth. It is similar to our hyphenated word "get-together". Jesus was having a get-together, a party, with these outcasts and lowlives and the religious people couldn't stand it.

This is how I picture it. Jesus is sitting in a circle with these outcasts. He is eating and drinking and laughing and chatting with these lowlifes. And the religious people come behind Jesus. They don't join in on the party. They just huff and puff, mutter and grumble, sigh and pace back and forth, just close enough for Jesus to pick up on their disapproval.

Finally Jesus gets up. But he doesn't yell at them for ruining his party. He compassionately tells them three stories or parables. Jesus tells these stories to explain why Jesus is having a party with these prodigals. He is telling these stories to challenge and confront these religious insiders.

These stories have a very simple plot line. There are three main parts to each story. Scene I: Lost. Scene II: found. Scene III: party. You need to recognize these three parts because Jesus is setting up these stories for a surprise punchline.

Let me read to you, story number 1: **“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. (Luke 15:4-7)**

Did you catch the three parts of the story? One sheep gets lost. That one sheep is found. And then the shepherd calls his friends and they have a party. Lost. Found. Party. Jesus explains that is what happens in heaven when one lost sinner, repents and is found. There is a party in heaven.

Let's look at the second story. **⁸ “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:8-10)**

Again, Jesus tells a simple story with the same basic plot. The woman loses one coin. She finds that one coin. Then she throws a party. Lost. Found. Party. Jesus says that is what happens in the presence of the angels when a sinner repents. There is a party in heaven.

Now Jesus moves on to the third story. And in this third story there is a twist, a surprise ending. And the surprise ending is the point of these parables.

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. (Luke 15:11-12)

This is pretty bad. The younger son doesn't want his dad. He just wants his dad's stuff and he is not even willing to wait until he dies. He demands his inheritance today.

¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. (Luke 15:13-16)

The younger son selfishly and stupidly buys a ticket to Vegas and spends all his inheritance on blackjack and brothels. After he spent it all the economy takes a dive and he has nothing. He starts working at a dead-end job. But even that wasn't enough to make rent and buy groceries.

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. (Luke 15:17-20)

The younger son hits rock bottom. He is lost and he knows it. So he decides to go back to his father. On the plane ride back, he practices his “I’m-so-sorry-speech”.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. (Luke 15:20)

While the son is walking home, his father is on the porch waiting for him. He sees him in the distance and his love and compassion for him, moves him to run out to his son. He runs out to his son, throws his arms around him and kisses him. His son who was lost is found. Lost. Found. What do you think is coming next?

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:21-24)

The younger son tries to apologize, but before he can even get out the words, the father is calling the caterer and the DJ. He is ordering the bounce house and the balloons. His son was lost. Now he is found. It's time for a party.

Now we would expect the story to end there. The previous two stories ended like this. Lost. Found. Party. The End. But now there is a twist, a surprise ending. Something we didn't see coming.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ (Luke 15:25-27)

The older brother comes in from working hard in his father's fields and he hears music and dancing. Maybe a balloon floats out of a window. And he asks “what's going on?” A servant explains that he younger brother is back home, safe and sound. What are you expecting? We are expecting that the older brother is going to be excited to see his sibling. We expect him to join in on the party.

Jesus goes on, **²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my**

friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ (Luke 15:28-30)

But that is not what happens. The older brother is angry and frustrated. He will not go in. He explains his reasons. Father, I’ve been slaving away all these years, doing the right thing in order to win your approval. But I don’t see you throwing any parties for me.

I picture Jesus telling this part of the story as he looks right into the eyes of the Pharisees and religious insiders. He wants them to see that they are the older brother. They don’t approve of what Jesus is doing, so they refuse to join Jesus’ party.

If you grew up in church, you have probably heard the parable of the prodigal son. And maybe you thought Jesus was telling his story to outcasts and screw ups. But when we look at the context, we see that Jesus was telling it to the religious people inside the church. He was speaking this parable to people like me. I’m a religious professional and I can grumble and miss out on what Jesus is up to and the party he is planning.

I walk my dog every morning. Because of the walks I have gotten to know more people in the neighborhood. Over the past few weeks, I’ve notice different lawn signs in one of my neighbors. I don’t agree with the message of that lawn sign. In fact, I’m frustrated that they put it up. In my frustration, I’ve forgotten what God is up to in my neighborhood. He is on a mission to bring each person who has strayed back home to him. He has compassion on my neighbors and is planning to throw a party for them when they come back home. And my attitude is keeping me from joining Jesus on his mission and participating in the party.

I want you to think about your neighborhood. Do you get frustrated or angry with how lost your neighbor is? Maybe it is a son or daughter or friend or relative or co-worker. Have you forgotten that God loves them and wants to bring them back home? Have you forgotten that God’s desire is to throw a party for them?

Why do we struggle so much with God’s compassion for the lost? Why do we struggle to have compassion for the “younger brother”, “the prodigal”? Maybe we have forgotten the compassion God has for us. We forgotten the joy of God’s grace. Maybe our faith is more of the duty of a slave than the joy of a son.

We have worked hard to gain the approval of God or the approval of others. And so we got no room for grace and compassion for the lost. But what if we didn’t need to work for God’s approval? Look at how the Father responds to the older brother.

...his father went out and pleaded with him...³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.’³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” (Luke 15:28,31-32)

Look and listen to how the father respond to the older brother. The father goes out to the older brother. Just like the father ran out to the lowlife, prodigal younger brother, now the father runs out to the rule-keeping religious older brother. He says, “My son...you...are...always...with...me...and...everything...I have ...is yours...”

Let me speak to older brothers and religious people like myself. Listen to the voice of God. God says to you, "My son, My daughter, you are always with me." Children of God, God is always with you. God loves you in Jesus Christ. You don't have anything to prove to him. You don't have to slavishly win approval. Everything that you are looking for, you already have in Christ. You have God's acceptance. You have a purpose. You have the guidance of the Holy Spirit. You have no fear of death. You have the forgiveness of sins. You have a father, who watches over your life and will provide for all your needs. But your brother down the street, he's lost. He doesn't have the peace of Christ. He doesn't know he his life has eternal meaning and purpose. He doesn't know there forgiveness and hope. He needs to come back home. And when he comes back home, we are going to throw a party for him."

Here is what you need to know: **God loves his lost children because lost children are all that there are.**

Whether you are lost because you ran from God or you are lost because you are slavishly trying to be a good person and win approval. God loves you and he is calling you all back to himself.

So what is Jesus inviting us to do through these stories? **Party with the prodigals.** This doesn't me that we join in the sin of the reckless and the rebellious. But God is calling us to love and enjoy the one person he has put in our lives. Love your neighbor. Join Jesus on his mission to bring your lost neighbor or friend back home. Then be ready to celebrate and party with Jesus and all the angels when God calls them back.

Jesus is still throwing parties, even and especially in the pandemic. Wherever there is someone who is turning back to God, wherever someone is hitting rock bottom and ready to come home, Jesus is planning a party. Let's join Jesus on his mission and party with the prodigals. Amen.