

44 Celebrating the Homecoming

“In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:10)

Tony Campolo tells the story of a trip that he took to Hawaii. Jet lag kept him awake late into the night, and he went out for a walk on the streets of Honolulu. At two in the morning, he found himself in a doughnut shop. Sitting at the counter, he overheard several prostitutes who were sharing a booth. One of the girls, whose name was Agnes, mentioned that it was her birthday.

After she had left, Tony turned to the cook and the other prostitutes and said, “Let’s throw a party for Agnes.” The other girls agreed to bring decorations, and the cook said that he would bake a cake.

That night, they all gathered at the shop and when Agnes walked in, they brought out the cake and began to sing, “Happy Birthday.” Tears streamed down Agnes’ face, and when it came time to cut the cake, she just stood there. Finally she said, “Could I buy another cake and we’ll eat that one? I want to take this one home and show it to my mother.”

With that, she took the cake and left. In the sudden silence that filled the shop after she left, Tony bowed his head and began to pray, “Lord we thank you for Agnes and for your love for her. You loved her enough to send your Son to die for her on the cross. We thank you for the best present of all—the present of your own Son. Amen.” When he raised his head, he saw that all of the prostitutes had their heads bowed and had been praying with him.

The cook looked at him and said, “You’re a preacher!” When Tony admitted that he

was, the cook asked, “What kind of church do you have?” In a sudden flash of insight, Tony replied, “The kind that throws parties for prostitutes and gives invitations to sinners” (Campolo, pp. 3-7).

Jesus likes parties. This is pretty obvious in the fifteenth chapter of Luke. Three parables. Three things lost: A lost sheep. A lost coin. A lost son. Each story ends up with a party. Each story has one person looking for friends and neighbors to share in the joy and celebration. This is the thread that connects all three. Look over these three parables. The object of attention is not the sheep or the coin or the son. The focus is on the one searching. Each of them find what they are looking or waiting for, and they invite people to share in their joy and join in the party.

Nothing brings God greater joy than when one sinner repents and is safely back in the fold. Lost people matter to God. It matters not why they are lost. Some who are lost are very close to home, even within the confines of the church. They, like the coin, are helpless and can do nothing on their own to help themselves. Others are lost due to their ignorance and waywardness. Like the sheep, they are vulnerable to danger and harm. Searching for them is a much wider adventure. As with the lost son, some are lost because of willful disobedience and sinful living. No matter the condition or the reason, lost people matter to God. Charles Spurgeon wrote a century ago:

“There are Christmas days in heaven where Christ’s high mass is kept, and Christ is not glorified because He was born in a manger but because He is born in a broken heart. And these are days when the Shepherd brings home the lost sheep upon His shoulders, when the church has swept her house and found the lost piece of money, for then are those friends and neighbors called together, and they rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory over one sinner who repents” (MacArthur, 1996, p. 246).

It’s rather amazing, isn’t it? Jesus portrays the sheer delight that goes on over one sinner who repents. In the movie, “It’s A Wonderful Life,” Clarence, the angel, explains that each time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings. That is nothing compared to the picture here. Jesus portrays three different views. In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus says:

“I tell you that in the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (Luke 15:7).

“There is more rejoicing in heaven.”

Who is it that shares in this rejoicing? Is it the angels? The saints? It is left unsaid, but this much is clear: When one sinner repents, there is a party in heaven.

In the second parable, the picture is one of God leading the rejoicing.

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In his commentary on Luke, Dr. William Arndt writes:

“Bringing a lost one back into safety is the basis of joy before the angels of God, that is, in God Himself, who is here thought of as sitting on His throne, surrounded by the heavenly servants, who see Him rejoice and share His joy” (p. 348).

I can only begin to imagine the angels looking on as God dances around, cheering and applauding wildly in joy over just one sinner who is back home again. What must go through their minds to see God in all of His glory taking such delight over one person—a mortal, no less—being carried back home on the shoulders of Jesus?

That leads me to ask, “Where am I in that crowd when the cheering starts? Do I share in the joy?” God is exuberant, but I am afraid that I am not always quick to join in the celebration or to invite people like that prostitute to the party. In the third parable of the lost son, at the very end, the picture of rejoicing is much different:

“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 15:32).

This parable portrays that the rejoicing is more by those on earth. Those who are a part of the family and community of this prodigal son are the ones who rejoice and celebrate. That would seem to place this question directly at the feet of the church today: How shall we rejoice and join with God and the heavenly hosts in rejoicing over the lost who have come home?

Maybe it would help if we understood what all the fuss was about. Why the rejoicing in the first place?

Those in heaven who see God rejoicing and leading the cheers understand exactly what the father was saying to the older son when the younger son returned home: *“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.”*

Lost or found. Dead or alive. Damned or saved. Foolish or wise. There is no neutral ground when it comes to things spiritual. There is no middle road when it comes to one’s walk with Christ.

When the RMS Titanic sank, more than twenty-two hundred people were cast into the

frigid waters of the Atlantic. On shore, the names of the passengers were posted in two simple columns: Saved and Lost. God's list is equally simple (Lucado, p. 148).

The angels rejoice and celebrate with God over each person that repents. How many times has it been that this party was thrown in my honor? How many times have I been the one that strayed off, only to be rescued and carried home in the arms of love and grace? Shall I now sit here and watch as some neutral spectator? Why is it that I show more joy watching my favorite team celebrate a championship on the field than I do

in knowing God's joy in just one person who is safe at home with Him? Celebrating is the response of those who are passionate about the mission Christ has given us. God is looking for churches that will join Him in rejoicing over the lost coming home. He is looking for churches that know how to throw a great homecoming party.

Prayer: Father, in the repentance of just one sinner your heart is filled with joy. All of heaven joins in your celebration. May I and your church on Earth be marked by this joy as well. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Challenge: Is there someone you know who has come back home to Christ? Send them a note or gift and let them know the joy it gives you to have them back.

Scripture Reading: Luke 15

From the Book of Concord: "In the last chapter of Luke [24:47], Christ commands the preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name. The gospel accuses all people of being under sin and subject to eternal wrath and death and for Christ's sake offers the forgiveness of sins and justification, which are received by faith. The proclamation of repentance, which accuses us, terrifies consciences with genuine and serious terrors. In the midst of these, hearts must once again receive consolation. This happens when they believe the promise of Christ, namely, that on his account we have the forgiveness of sins. This faith, which arises and consoles in the midst of those fears, receives the forgiveness of sins, justifies us, and makes alive. For this consolation is a new and spiritual life" (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV: Justification, p. 130.62).