

Hespeler, 15 September, 2019 © Scott McAndless

Exodus 32:7-14, Psalm 51:1-10, 1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10

Hello, 911 emergency? Yes, I need assistance right away. No, there's nothing happening right here, but it's my neighbour. He has all kinds of people over at his house. They are noisy. They are dancing and singing and having a great time. It's just not right! No, I know it's not too late and the noise isn't really disturbing anyone, it's not that.

No, it's not that I wasn't invited either. In fact, my neighbour came over here and practically begged me to come to the party. It was so embarrassing. "I lost my little lamb" he said. "It wandered far over hill and dale and made some pretty bad decisions – hanging out with wolves and lions and the like. It was a very foolish little lamb and it made me worry no end. I had to abandon the whole rest of the flock, just leave it out there in the wilderness, and search high and low, but I finally found it. I brought it home and now it's safe. So I'm getting together with a few of my friends and neighbours and we're just going to celebrate. I mean, I'm so happy have my lamb back. So, will you come and join us in our revelries?"

Yes, that's right. He wanted me to join in a celebration of what, as far as I'm concerned, is a wayward black sheep. Oh, I've heard the rumors about that lamb. They say that it got hooked on oxycontin and ended up shooting up in alleyways. There's also rumors that it got involved in some strange sex cult and did unspeakable things. In fact, the more my friends and I talk about it on Facebook, the more stories I hear about the terrible things that it did.

And it's just not right. Back in my day, we didn't celebrate the wandering sheep. We didn't throw parties for the sheep that went off and got involved in bad things, who got hooked on drugs and video games and easy sex. We discouraged that kind of thing! We made sure that we never let anybody forget how guilty they were for what they did wrong. We reminded them that they should be ashamed. And yet here they are celebrating bad behaviour.

Has that lamb shown any evidence that it recognizes what it did wrong or that it can see the pain that it put other people through? Does it even recognize how much it has cost the public security system that I help pay for? Worst of all, have we any reason whatsoever to expect that, now that it has been returned home safe and sound, it won't go off wandering once again tomorrow or maybe the next day. And with all this understood, my foolish neighbour and his stupid friends are whooping it up and having a grand old time celebrating that returned lamb.

What do I want you to do? I want you to send the police over here and straighten them all out. I want the cops to scare that lamb straight – maybe throw him in prison for a couple of nights so that he sees where his foolish behaviour might land him in the long run. But, however they manage it, I

want them to shut down that very inappropriate party and make sure that people think very soberly and critically about what I think they have done wrong...

What do you mean you don't do that kind of thing? I don't care if nobody is *technically* breaking the law, I pay your salary and somebody needs to fix this for me. (Hangs up.)

Hello, 911, yes, I will state the nature of my emergency. The nature of my emergency is that the last time I called, nobody came! Why yes, I'm flattered that you remember me. I *am* the person who called about the sheep party yesterday and you were honestly no help whatsoever. But I've decided to give you a chance to redeem yourself today. No, I'm not calling about my neighbour with the sheep. His house is all quiet; I guess that maybe the wandering sheep did learn a lesson. No, it's the neighbour on the other side who's causing all the trouble today.

Why yes, it is a party and it's even noisier and more rambunctious than the one that was going on yesterday. What are they celebrating? Well, you're not going to believe this one. It's about a coin. Yes, you heard me right, a coin. I know, right? Who throws a party over a coin? But that is the craziness that's going on in my neighbourhood tonight and I blame you guys. Maybe if there had been a reasonable response to the sheep party yesterday, somebody would have thought twice about throwing a party over something as frivolous as a coin.

Okay, since you don't really seem to have anything to do (which is actually a bit surprising) I'll tell you the whole story. My neighbour on the other side, you see, is very poor. She is so poor that in an entire year of working hard and scrimping and saving she was only able to put aside ten coins. That's it, only ten. Now I don't mean to look down on people who have to work for a living but, come on, if you are that poor, there's got to be something wrong with you. You must be making some bad choices and have bad priorities.

Let me tell you some of the rumours that are going around about her. I've heard that she has spent her welfare money buying lobster and filet mignon! What's worse, she smokes. Now, do you know how much it costs for cigarettes these days? Just think of how much money she would save if she quit!

Now, I know what she tells me. She says that she's working three different jobs because no one will hire her full-time and two of them pay her under the table so they don't even have to meet minimum wage. She claims that she's so exhausted after working at her first two jobs and heading for her third that the only thing that gives her the energy to get through it is a quick hit of nicotine. Now, to me, that sounds like a serious lack of

character. She should have gotten her priorities straight long before this. That's why I figure it must be her own fault that she's so poor.

So, anyway, like I said, she managed to do something responsible by saving up ten whole coins, but then she showed just how irresponsible she was by losing one of them. Just goes to show you that poor is as poor does. So, she panics, cleans her whole house and finally finds the lost coin.

Now, if she had any shame – which she apparently does not – she would be ashamed of having lost the coin in the first place. If she had any dignity, she would just be quiet about it. She would be quietly thankful to find her lost money and do what I'd do, pretend like nothing ever happened. But does she do that? No! She's got to call attention to her foolishness by inviting everybody over for a great big rowdy celebration.

And let me ask you, how is she affording this party? How can somebody whose whole life is working at miserable jobs and scrimping and saving and going without just to save up ten measly little coins possibly justify spending anything to celebrate the one good thing that happened in her life this whole year?

So, this time you guys are going to do something about this. She is benefiting from social services and the low income tax credit, not to mention health care and other universal services, and so, as a taxpayer I have every right to tell her what she should be spending her money on and what she shouldn't. You need to send some people over here right now and shut down that party. But... Yes, but... I suppose, but don't you think that... Hello? Hello?

What are those two parables of Jesus really about? I know that it says in the gospel that they're all about the excitement and celebration that there is in heaven over one sinner who repents, and, yes they are about that, but when you really listen to the stories, that's not exactly what they put the emphasis on. Both stories end with celebration, but the celebration is odd and somewhat unexpected. The celebration, in many ways, is outrageous. Why would you celebrate one wayward sheep who was found and brought back to the fold? Why celebrate the finding of one lost coin?

Jesus told these parables as a way of illustrating what the kingdom of God was like. And the bottom line seems to be that the kingdom of God is all about what seem to be inappropriate celebrations. And the celebrations are all happening in this world, too, not in some other world. The kingdom of God is about celebrating things that this world finds scandalous. In particular, it is about celebrating people that others may feel are somehow shameful or guilty or otherwise unacceptable in some way.

How should we take that and apply it to modern life – say, perhaps, the life of the church today? Think of it this way, we like to talk about how our churches are open and welcoming, about how we welcome anyone no

matter who they are. It's what we put on our signs and in our bulletins. And, in theory, we do welcome everyone who walks through the doors of a church with a warm handshake and a cheery hello. But the kingdom of God is not just about welcoming people. Jesus, in these parables, seems to be saying that it is about celebrating people and about celebrating them as they are.

I would like us to note that usually we would like to celebrate the people who conform to our idea of what a Christian is supposed to be or look like or act like. We would rather wait for them to change and become just like us before we even think of celebrating them – something that, in many cases, will not happen and maybe should not happen. The celebrations that Jesus describes in these parables are scandalous celebrations, the kind that people would have objected to.

We are asked to choose life if we are going to be followers of Jesus Christ. That includes choosing life for our churches. We think that the way to do that is to make sure that everyone in our churches is the same – that they all believe exactly the same things, dress alike, behave alike and hold exactly the same ethical ideas about behaviour. Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God as something that is, in our eyes, a premature or scandalous celebration where we celebrate people for who they already are – for who God has created them to be.

And, you know what, that is going to upset some people. Some people are going to say, “You shouldn't be celebrating them as they are, you should be telling people to change that about themselves.” And so, it might seem as if celebrating people as they are is something that will keep the church from living and growing as people get offended by our celebrations and may turn away. I just wanted to point out that Jesus didn't think about it that way, didn't think that way at all.