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“Jesus’ Joy, Our Joy”

Text: Luke 15:1-10 (Ezekiel 34:11-24; 1 Timothy 1:5-17)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

There’s *them*, and there’s *us*. We all do it. We just define “them” differently, depending on who you are and what you consider important. The labels and categories may be different and change from time to time, but it’s still *them* and *us*. Liberals and conservatives. Seniors and freshmen. Union and non-union. Even in the church we do this. Confessional or missional. Traditional or contemporary. And for the Pharisees and Scribes in the Gospel today, it was them or the “tax collectors and sinners.” Why this matters is because *whether or not* the label or category is appropriate or true, it makes a difference in how we look at others and how we regard them and think about them. Both for the better and for the worse.

But not Jesus. For Him, it’s all us. All of us the same. All of us His creation. All of us fallen and lost in sin. All of us in need of rescue. All of us He wants as His children.

And so He acts like it. As we heard today, He comes for us and searches for us. And He does not give up. He searches in every nook and cranny of this world. He searches in all the places we like to hide. So great His desire to find us, and so great His joy when He does. A joy that seems quite out of proportion to the value of the thing lost - and yet the joy that is His in finding sinners like you and me, in giving us His forgiveness, in giving us the gift of eternal life. He does not grudgingly do this but delights to do so. And His joy and delight is shared by the angels and all the company of heaven. It’s not Him *and* us, it’s Him for us.

Now there are two different things going on here. There is **first** the truth of how Jesus looks at and regards us, and the length He is willing to go for us - even to death on the cross, taking our sins that we be forgiven. This you know. You’ve been taught it and heard it from this pulpit time and time again, though you can never hear it enough. But the **second** thing here is Jesus’ joy in finding us. And for me, at least, that’s a bit harder to understand. I’ve lost things before and I’ve searched hard for them, but usually when I find them it’s not joy that I feel, but relief.

But earlier this year, I think I finally understood this a bit. I don’t usually tell stories in my sermons, and hardly ever stories about myself, but you’re going to get one today!

It happened the day after Easter which, if you know me, is a day I usually try to go out and play golf. After all the intensity of Holy Week and Easter, it is a chance for me to get

outside and give my mind a break, to just walk around and enjoy the day. But this year as I was getting my stuff ready, *I lost my wedding ring*. I've been wearing it for almost 20 years now, and while I never feel it falling off, I almost always immediately notice when it's not there. So I was getting ready when I noticed it wasn't there. I looked around the floor right where I was. Nothing. I looked in my golf bag. Nothing. I looked again and again. Nothing. It wasn't close by.

So I expanded my search. I looked everywhere I had walked - in the hallway, up the stairs, in the bedroom and bathroom. Nothing. I looked again and again. Nothing. I looked in the kitchen and dining room. Nothing. It wasn't in the house.

So I began to look still farther, getting quite upset now. It's just a wedding ring, but at the same time *it's more than that*. And I really wanted it back. And not just *any* one - I wanted that one. So, after muttering a few - *probably whiny* - prayers, I started to look outside. I had walked Joanna to the bus stop earlier, maybe it had fallen off while I was putting on my clothes and had worked its way out my pant leg. And my mind started playing tricks on me . . . had I heard it hit the pavement? So I began slowly walking, looking on the sidewalk, on the grass, all around the bus stop. Nothing. I walked back to the house, by the mailbox. Nothing. It wasn't outside.

So back in the house. I looked in all the same places. Nothing. I started moving things it could be under, even though it couldn't possibly be under those things. Nothing. Back outside. Back to the bus stop. Nothing. I didn't even want to play golf anymore - I just wanted to find my ring. Then as I was *again* walking back past the mail box, one of my neighbors came out and said, "You're looking quite pensive." I told him my story as we exchanged some small talk, and went on. But nothing. I was beginning to sadly resign myself to the fact that it was lost. Maybe *someday* I would find it.

But back inside the house I went and looked some more. I looked in all the same places *again*, some it seems for about the seventh time. And then, right where I had been packing my golf bag, right where I thought and expected it would be, I found it. I don't know why I hadn't seen it before, but there it was. And this time, I did not feel relief at finding it, **but joy**. *And the first thing I wanted to do was run down the street and tell my neighbor I found it*. That's unusual for me. I'm kind of a private person and wouldn't usually do that. But such was my joy.

**And such is Jesus' joy over you.** Maybe you think you're just another person, just another sinner, no big deal. But not so. Jesus doesn't want another person, or a better person, or an easier person, He wants you. You matter.

The Pharisees and the Scribes didn't get that. Why would Jesus eat with . . . *them*? Why would He care so much? Why not rejoice in *us*, the good guys? Well, Jesus wanted to rejoice in them too, and forgive them too. No labels or categories for Jesus, just sinners in

need of forgiveness. Or perhaps we should say, brides in need of cleansing. For Jesus doesn't just want you as a servant, but as His bride, that you be one with Him and receive all that He is and all that He has. For you are His joy and He wants to be yours.

We heard from St. Paul today: *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.* Paul considered himself not even at the level of tax collectors and sinners, but beneath them. A sinner of sinners. But Jesus wanted him, really sinful him, and rejoiced over him. And that made Paul rejoice in Jesus.

And if for Paul, then also for you. You might be the foremost sinner, the least sinner, or someplace in between. No matter. To Jesus you are a sheep, a coin, a ring that He desperately wants to find, that He desperately wants to wash clean in forgiveness, that He desperately wants to feed with His Body and Blood, that He desperately wants in heaven as His bride.

So if you're going to label yourself, if there's any category, if there's any *them* and *us*, let it be this: **Jesus Christ my Bridegroom, and you and me His forgiven bride.** And then rejoice with the angels, and with all who receive this forgiveness.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.