

## 40 DAYS OF COMMUNITY – CELEBRATION SUNDAY

By Rev. Leo Douma

Luke 15

Have you ever considered that God loves a big party, that he really enjoys a big celebration? While we may not have thought in those terms we can imagine it if we tried. What New Year's Eve fireworks on the Harbour Bridge could ever compare with the spectacles of light in the galaxies? What chef could ever dream up the varieties of foods God created, with all their colours and textures and flavours? What event organizer has ever had the imagination and sense of humour that God displays in the glorious variety of animals and plants?! God celebrates with beauty and delight, in a far bigger way than we could even begin to imagine. Now consider this: what is it that makes God really jubilant? What is it that has the whole of heaven ecstatic with joy and celebration? Here's a clue. During a conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated, what belief, if any, was unique to the Christian faith. The debate went on for some time until C.S. Lewis wandered into the room. "What's the rumpus about?" he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, "Oh, that easy. It's grace." The people at the conference had to agree. The idea of God's love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct we have. In all other religions you have to earn approval. Only Christianity shows us that God's love is unconditional. We live in a world where there is not a lot of grace. God's grace is often very hard to fathom, so Jesus talked about it often. We see it here in our text in Luke 15. (:1,2) *"Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathered around to hear [Jesus]. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them'".* The Pharisees, very strict in their religion, would never associate with the 'sinners'; you know, the tax collectors who fleeced people of their hard earned money, the prostitutes, the drunks. But Jesus welcomed them and ate with them. In the Middle East eating a meal together is a sign of closeness, being friends, making covenant together. So the Pharisees were quite disgusted with Jesus. So Jesus told them a parable. Well actually he told three parables which all had the same message. Any one of them would have proved his point. But Jesus told three. Now here is the lead question of the sermon: Why? Well, partly because that's what God always seems to do. When God wants us to really get the point, when he wants us to remember something, he repeats himself. When he wants to catch our attention he tells us the same things, over and over again, many times in different ways; because we are usually so slow to catch on. So now we know that there is something very remarkable here in what Jesus says; something that so important that he makes sure he gets the Pharisees attention, but also the 'sinners' attention, and our attention. There is something else. All these parables, while making the same point are slightly different. A man has 100 sheep. He loses one, 1/100<sup>th</sup> of his property, and he searches the countryside till he finds it. A woman with 10 coins, loses a 1/10<sup>th</sup> of her money and searches the house till she finds it. A father has 2 sons and he loses ½ of his children. He keeps on watching, day after day, until his son returns. Each parable tells a story of items that are increasingly more valuable; as if Jesus were saying: "It doesn't matter how valuable a person may seem to you. God will do whatever is necessary to find that which is lost."

Now, I am not going to go into detail with each parable. Most of you know them well. What I want to focus on is what happens in each case. Notice the thing that is repeated, that which Jesus really wants us to notice. Verse 6&7, after the shepherd has found his

lost sheep: "Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep'. I tell you that in the same way there is much rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." Verse 9&10 after the woman has found her coin: "And when she finds it she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Verse 22-24, after the prodigal son has come home and repented. "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. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate." Verse 31&32, after the older brother complained: "'My son', the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 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.'" What do we see here? What can you not miss? That God and the whole of heaven are jubilant, jumping up and down for joy, ecstatic, celebrating big time! Why? Because what was lost is found; the sinner has repented and come home. Max Lucado in his book *'Just like Jesus'* writes: "Let one child consent to be dressed in righteousness and begin the journey home and heaven pours the punch, strings the streamers, and throws the confetti...when a soul is saved, the heart of Jesus becomes like the night sky on the Fourth of July, radiant with explosions of cheer." What makes the heart of God ecstatic? What makes him want to party? A sinner coming home! I suspect we don't usually picture God this way. I suspect the ungraciousness of our world, our culture, even our own traditions get in the way of us really seeing what Jesus says here. I sense that's why he repeats the message in three parables. I remember years ago in my first church a couple in their late sixties were converted and made their profession of faith in our church. I was really happy about the occasion because the Christian couple who had brought them to Christ had been their friends for 40 years. When I expressed my joy in a catechism class a 15 year old said 'What's the big deal? God had it all in his plan anyway!' The Bible is God's revealing of Himself, letting us know what he is like. A housewife jumping up and down in glee over the discovery of a lost coin is not what naturally comes to mind when we think of God. Yet that is the image Jesus insists on. Jesus says in effect, "Do you want to know what it feels like to be God? When one of those two-legged humans pays attention to me, it feels like I just reclaimed my most valuable possession, which I had given up for lost. I am soooooo happy!" Have you thought of God in these terms? I suspect too often we have too passive a view of God; that he is this unfeeling force, this unfeeling judge. Too often we don't think in terms of God having feelings, of him being deeply involved in our lives, how much it hurts him when we sin, how full of joy he is when we repent and strive to worship him with all our living. If your view is too passive you have misunderstood God. The prophet Micah (7:18) asks "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy." God cannot be compared with anything else; so great is his majesty. "Who is a God like you?" But also in this God is totally without comparison: in that he delights, he rejoices, he celebrates in showing mercy. This attitude is hard to understand. It is, in fact, astonishing. Consider the unworthiness of the objects of his mercy. Why should he who is completely perfect show mercy to those who rebel against him, who continue to defy him, who find their greatest pleasure in trampling underfoot his perfect world. Surely the delight God takes in showing mercy is breathtaking, so unexpected. What is also astonishing is the cost to God to show this mercy. Jesus in telling the three parables makes no mention as to how the father can be so merciful, so forgiving, so receiving of his wayward son. But you

see Jesus is the story teller, and it is the story teller that makes it possible. The love of God is seen in what He gave to bring about forgiveness: *"For God so loved the world, he gave his only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* No wonder God celebrates when a sinner repents and believes and come home to God.

Today is Celebration Sunday, the last day in our 40 Days of Community. With God we want to celebrate, to rejoice and praise God, for his love and compassion that comes in Jesus. We celebrate because without God's grace in Jesus, we would not know what love really is, which we said on our first Sunday, is the reason why we are here. There would be no fellowship together, no growing together; no serving together. We would have no reason to reach out together, nothing to bring out our exuberance and praise to worship together. Today we celebrate together because we have seen the grace of God at work in our midst. Through the 40 days God's word has deeply challenged us. We have been together to hear God's word preached, we have studied it in our groups; we have meditated and prayed over it with our personal devotions. We have seen people grow to know and appreciate each other. We have seen people grow in their willingness to serve, to sign up to ministry in the church. We have seen the fruit of reaching out to the community, giving for overseas mission. We have seen so many of our members coming together in worship. We can and we should celebrate because these things are signs of God at work. This is what has God and heaven singing. When God's people are growing in their love for each other and devotion to do God's work, it is an indicator of our responding to God's grace, that not only are we repentant sinners, the lost who have come home, but those who keep growing in love for God. Let's celebrate as God does, for the same reason God does. And let's keep doing what we have been doing for the past 40 days. Please don't let it be another program we forget, another training we seldom use. Let's keep loving, serving, growing, let's keep celebrating the astounding love of God. Let's keep imitating our God in our service and love and care for each other. The story is told of a painter who was commissioned to do a painting of the prodigal son as he came home. When the painting was finished, the man who commissioned it was keen to see it. He saw this magnificent painting of the father embracing the son, hugging him deeply. But then the man noticed something that shocked him. The shoes on the father's feet; the artist had painted them different colours. When the man challenged the artist asking how he could be so silly, the artist replied, he did it quite deliberately. He painted the shoes in different colors to picture a father who was so excited, so exuberant at seeing his lost son come home, that he threw on any shoes in his haste, not looking at them or caring how he looked, he just had to get out there and welcome his son. That concept speaks volumes doesn't it? The God of unmatched shoes! The thought touches me deeply. How can we not keep loving each other, keep serving each other, keep growing and worshipping together when we have a God who delights so much to show mercy, who throws a huge party because I, because you, have come home in repentance. The grace of God is amazing, isn't it!?

There's a gospel song entitled, "That's when the angels rejoice" written by Larry Bryant: "When the Model T first hit the street/ It didn't bring all of heaven to its feet./ And when the first computer was born/ They didn't blow Old Gabriel's horn./ There's only one thing we're sure about/ That can make those angels jump and shout:/ it's when a sinner makes the Lord his choice;/ That's when the angels rejoice./ Now heaven doesn't strike up a band/ For any old occasion at hand; / It's got to be a special thing, / To make those angels smile and sing./ Now when the United States became a nation,/ There was no

angelic celebration./ But when one lost sinner comes back home,/ They jump for joy  
around the throne!