

C Lectionary 24 9.11.22

Luke 15:1-10

Focus Statement: There is always joy.

Gloria, Diane, Teresa, and I are taking a class together on building a culture of generosity in our congregation. More on that as we get into the fall stewardship season. But the point of my sharing it today is last week's session was talking about telling impact stories, stories about how the ministry of your congregation has touched people's lives. "No one wants to hear about the carpet needing to be replaced," the presenter said. And, because this is how my competitive mind works, I immediately thought, try me. To be clear, I don't think we need to replace this carpet, this is not a pitch for that. This carpet is a little funky, and could probably stand a good cleaning, but there's nothing functionally wrong with it. But I do want to tell you the story of this carpet, or at least, the parts of its history that I know. Because guys, this carpet has seen some things.

These lines over here, this is because during the pandemic we needed like somewhere in the neighborhood of a million microphones to get music from inside the sanctuary to outside the building. A million microphones comes with a million lines of cord, as you can see. To prevent tripping, because who wants to go to the ER with a dislocated something when there's a pandemic, we taped all the cords down. Carpet reminds us where the tape was. This big ole' stain back here, this was a tipped over coffee cup from a very animated Emmett Township community meeting back in 2016, when they were trying to pass a millage to have the streets repaved. If you've driven recently in Emmett Township and noticed how much better the roads are, thank this coffee stain.

This one up here, this one's mine, also pandemic themed. The projection device—my phone on a tripod, sat right here on a little tower I built it out of a chair and one of those wooden boxes. I got too into listening to a hymn one morning and had to rush back to move the camera, and I accidentally tipped over my coffee cup over in the process. This one over here by the Swansons, I'm like 90% sure this was Family Camp a few years ago, but if it wasn't Family Camp, the fruit snacks on the shelf in the pulpit definitely are.

The point is, this carpet has been well and thoroughly church-ed. It has been lived on. It has born muddy shoes, spilled beverages, tape, rain, the occasional random animal, a lot of plastic pine needles. I love that about this carpet, about this church. I love that we are a congregation where children can run, and community meetings can happen, and friends and families not just our own but those of our extended community can gather for weddings and funerals, baptisms and graduations. I pray someday, not soon, mind you, not this year, but some day, when this carpet does eventually reach its threadbare end and need replacing, that we or our successors will also spill coffee and run around and track mud on that carpet. Because the point of a church building is to live in it.

Before we get too far into this stained carpet line of reasoning, let me first be clear that I am aware there's a difference between lived in and not cared for. There is a time and a place for lived in and a time and a place for the pristine. My first job was at a homeless shelter that, when it was constructed, was the nicest building in the neighborhood it went into, by a lot. The fourteenth street corridor had been decimated by riots in the late 60s, and by the 90s, the neighborhood was still burned out buildings and disrepair. When the design for

the new shelter was released, some of the funders tried to protest. Why put this kind of money into this neighborhood, for a homeless shelter no less? But the church behind the project stood firm. People deserve nice things, clean places, good design, wherever and whoever they are. Today, that homeless shelter is still a beautiful building and it fits in well among the high-rise condos that have sprung up around it. The investment of building an architecturally pleasing homeless shelter turned the whole neighborhood around. My point is, know the story before you jump in. A stained carpet may be the sign of a vibrant ministry, an overly ostentatious building in a rundown community a testament to the dignity of all people.

Our Gospel reading for this morning is from the same dinner party with Jesus and the Pharisees that we've been at for the last few weeks. The one where Jesus healed the guy on the sabbath, and the Pharisees were not keen on that. Then, having already offended his hosts, Jesus told the guests not to clamber for the best places at the table, but to sit at the lowest place, to invite the people to your own dinner parties who cannot invite you back. And then, last week's passage, when he turned to his own followers and told them to take up their crosses, finish what they started even though it's hard, and give away everything for the sake of the Gospel. It's been a tough dinner party.

You'd think by now the Pharisees would have learned some things about what Jesus valued, or at least to keep their mouths shut. But here we see that the tax collectors and sinners were coming near Jesus to listen to him, and the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Fun Greek fact for you

today, the word here for grumbling is *gongyzo*. *Gongyzo* is a great word because, one, it's just really fun to say. But two, it's an onomatopoeia, a word that sounds like what it is. *Gongyzo* sounds like the noise Cat makes when my friend's dog has come to visit and Cat wants dog to know who's house this is. It's grumbling, but it's grumbling meant to display one's displeasure.

And Jesus, being Jesus, heard the grumbling and just leaned straight into it by telling three consecutive parables about the joy of finding the lost. The two we read today, and the parable of the prodigal son, which we read back in March. These parables are interesting because at first glance, they're obvious. Who wouldn't be happy that they found their lost sheep, their lost coin. No one likes losing things, and even if you still have ninety-nine sheep, better to have all one hundred. But the shepherd parable is especially tricky because it forces the Pharisees to look at a couple of contradictory things. First, let's talk about shepherds. We have a scriptural view of shepherds. There's this parable of the shepherd, Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd", "the Lord is my shepherd," King David as a shepherd. We have all these images from the bible about shepherds as caregivers, that compare God to a shepherd. The Pharisees had those too. But they also had their cultural experience with shepherds as people who were shiftless, thieving, and untrustworthy. Just the sort of people like these sinners and tax collectors making their way into the dinner party. Bible shepherd, ok, but don't compare me to any actual shepherds.

Then there's the parable itself. Because certainly the Pharisees would have seen themselves in the ninety-nine. They'd done all the right things; they hadn't gotten lost.

Why would the shepherd pay attention to this one annoying wandering sheep, and not them who were right there being awesome, like always. But I think in this parable Jesus is pushing the Pharisees, pushing us, to not ask if we're the ninety-nine or the one, not wonder if we're lost or found, but simply to revel in the joy of a God who finds. The Pharisees get so caught up in the merit of their lives, how much they deserve God's favor, that they lose sight of the mercy, of a God who is just so happy to have God's children around that God throws a ridiculous party to celebrate, a party where everyone's invited.

Dear people of God, I think the takeaway for us from these parables is there is a lot of ways to live in the kingdom of God, to revel in God's mercy. Beauty is one. That shelter I worked at stuck out so much as to be almost an eyesore of human dignity in the middle of a neighborhood of the overlooked. Taking care in appearance, hospitality, attention, so others feel valued. But mess, use, signs of a life focused on relationship over preservation can be another. Stained carpets, the chalk that I definitely thought should have washed away by now, and the way when I walk into the kitchen at my best friend's house she says, "there's coffee. You know where the mugs are" without getting off the couch. A lived in, real, comfortable place is also a gift to be revealed in.

God is throwing a party, dear people, and not only are we all invited, we're all actually already at the party. Sometimes it's a party of sweeping beauty, the rush of the organ through the rafters, the breathlessness of creation, the satisfaction of a job well done. Other times it's coffee stains, cracked parking lots, and a whole lot of laughter. Sometimes it's all of that at the exact same time. But whatever it is today, in this moment, rejoice, for

God is here, and God is so filled with joy that you, that I, that all of us, and everyone else, is too. Thanks be to God. Amen.