

The Bethel Pulpit

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Jenny Jerome, Margie Czechowicz

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BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

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Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Please join me in a word of prayer. Gracious God of all mercy, You do welcome us when we are wayward, You do embrace us with all your mercy, and You do clothe us with garments of your grace in our baptism, and you do feed us at the table of your love. As we worship, clothed in our baptism and your table of forgiveness set before us, we ask that you send us from our worship to lives of service to you through the lives of others. We ask in Jesus name. Amen.

So, I have a question: how much you know about losing things? When was the last time you lost a sheep? No, don't remember that so much? Maybe, more realistically, you remember a time when you lost your credit card or your drivers license? These things we really need to go on with life these days. So, when I've done that and I recover "the lost" or I send in for a new one, do I call all my friends together and say "let's celebrate, "I found it, I found it!" We don't do that so much, do we? We're more reserved, more Lutheran, more Norwegian, or German or something. The two stories we just read, are the first two stories in the 15th chapter of the Gospel of Luke and the third story in that same chapter is the story often called the Prodigal Son. Do you know what prodigal means? I Prodigal does not mean wayward. It means reckless. We more accurately describe the father as being reckless, the Prodigal One, in this story, because this is a father reckless in his love for his son. And when his wayward son comes home who has squandered his entire inheritance, what does the father do? He throws a party. He says it is time to rejoice because my son has come home. So, it is good for us to take these stories as a paradigm for our own ways of living the Christian life. WE are the wayward ones, and God, our Prodigal and reckless God, receives and forgives us over and over again, throwing a party in heaven with all the angels, when we repent; when we turn away, once again, from our sin.

Everyone of us sitting here falls into the category that Jesus talks about when he says, "There is joy in heaven over one sinner, when she says I'm sorry, and I need forgiveness, and I need to be brought back into the party. " There is a bunch of joy in heaven, every time I turn my life around even if it is only for one more minute or one more day. And tomorrow I have to come back again. Because of all the times that I need to come back, I imagine heaven to be a constant round of parties. That is what the story is about.

These stories are all about a God who loves all of us and he calls us to worship together, to feast at the table, and celebrate our baptism.

Now, the question is: what do we do after the party? What do we do after we've been baptized, and we've feasted at the table and we've been assured that God loves us unconditionally? What do we do when we acknowledge and absorb the truth that God can't love me any more than God loves me right now. And God won't stop loving me this afternoon when I have to turn back to God again and say "Messed up again." God's love for me does not get larger or smaller depending on what I do, good or bad. That's really hard to take in and absorb, and live. Because if that is God's love for me, than I have to recognize that God loves every single person that same way.

So, I'm still asking the question: what do we do after the party? How do I live out that kind of unconditional love? That's where our service comes in. Once I know that God loves me in all of those horrible things that I wish I had never done, then all I can do is rejoice and go out and be sure that I spread that love wherever I go. We can call it service, we can call it discipleship, we can call it whatever we want.

It's important to remember that in this story of the wayward son who ran off, spent all his money, had to grovel and come home there is another son, the elder son who is saying. "That's not fair". It's not fair that he

ran off and has been living the life of Riley, and I've been here year after year and you have never thrown even one party for me.

And all of us would have to agree about the lack of fairness. Here, it is necessary to realize and accept the truth that is fairness is not a category that applies to God. God isn't fair. If God was fair, I wouldn't be here. And maybe you wouldn't be here either. If God rewarded, based on what I do, I have no place as an insider in the kingdom of God. To God, fairness is irrelevant. The only thing relevant to God is God's love for us. Because we rest assured that we are safe with a God who is going to love us forever, the only thing we can do is care for our neighbor. The only thing we can do is greet each other kindly and gently and warmly and lend a hand when people are in need.

You know, this journey of being a Pastor is really too much for me sometimes because I learn so much and I learn things so randomly. I was in the Emmaus room this morning before worship, talking with one of the gentlemen out there and he said that there are so many people who don't have a faith and sometimes they treat you really rotten. When that happens to me, he said, I just tell people to sit down and write a letter to that person telling that person how angry you are and what they did that is so unfair to you. Once you've written the letter, then you rip it up and throw it in the wastebasket and you get down on your knees and you pray for God to bless that person. I've never heard it put that way before, but I like this way of serving one another. We can "touch the lives of others, with God's surprising grace." Whether within our own walls or far beyond, when we leave the party, when we leave worship, shaped by worship, a meal, and baptism, prayers and songs we go out and God goes with us to touch people with a smile, a hug, and words of encouragement people.

Worship and service: totally connected, one to the other. Now I have two people who want to tell you more about worship and service, Margie and Jenny.

(Jenee Jerome) Greetings from the Worshiping Team. My name is Jenny Jerome and I was a founding member of the team during the recent transition process. Reading today's Gospel, created in me a feeling of kinship with those who lost extremely valuable items. I too have felt

some of those same emotions during times of loss: anxiety, stress and grief. At the same time, I am so glad to also share, that like those in the story who found their items, I, too, felt grateful, blessed, and joyous to have been surrounded by fellow leaders here at Bethel. As a former joint and ministry council member, I want to acknowledge the pastors and lay leaders who continually serve hundreds if not thousands of hours to see Bethel through this period of transition. Today I would like to give special thanks to the current members of the Worshiping Team, whose names you see in your bulletin and who continue to serve in their volunteer roles. I could go on but I also want to give Margie and opportunity to introduce herself and her team.

(Margie Chechowicz) Greetings from the Serving Ministry Team. My name is Margie Czechowicz and I am honored to serve on the Serving Ministry Team with some amazing, God-loving people whose names are in your bulletin. Today's story of the Parable of the Lost Sheep told by Jesus, illustrates the love and compassion that God has for all people. Jesus was being criticized by the religious leaders for eating with sinners. So, what does Jesus do? He stops the crowd and tells a story about a shepherd, that left his flock of 99 sheep to go and find one lost sheep. This parable gives a beautiful word picture of God seeking out that lost sheep. Here is the amazing twist of that story. That lost sheep is really you and me. We are the sinner that the Good Shepherd seeks and when God finds us, he rejoices, he welcomes, he loves. We serve a Good Shepherd whose heart is for you and for me. To be found, rescued and renewed. It is a gift, for sure. And when one receives a personalized gift of love like this, what are we to do? Do we just move on down the line without acknowledging that gift? Or responding? No, of course not. We respond in deep gratitude for this gift. In the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, we learn how to respond to God's great love for us. I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me. Then those sheep are going to say, "Master, what are you talking about?" When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink, and when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you? Then the king will say, "I'm telling the solemn truth, whenever

you did these things for someone who was overlooked or ignored, that was me. You did it to me.

The Serving Ministry Team is here to serve you. To be a conduit of ministry opportunity, so each of us can respond to God's great love to support those in need, who may be lost. It is serving within Bethel, and beyond Bethel. Wherever you are called that allows us to find those that are lost. It is in the giving and receiving that we receive the true poignant love of God. When that happens, we will celebrate the joy of God's love that allows us to show our deep gratitude for God's amazing gift that brings us back to worshiping the amazing God we serve.

(Jenee) Margie, thank you for so beautifully highlighting the connections between serving and worshiping. Our hymn of the day also poetically connects the two in the final verse stating: We are all called by worship to God's service. I found this verse powerful for a couple of reasons. First, the Worshiping Team supports and advocates for those who have been called to serve here, right now in this and other services. The ushers, the acolytes, the musicians, the communion assistants and the sound ushers. Although our team name may imply that we are helping to plan the worship service, instead team members seek to support the volunteers who help the Bethel staff insure that the service flows smoothly each week. These volunteers quietly and humbly create a peaceful and joyful atmosphere for hundreds of people each weekend. And I am confident that the worship experience at Bethel wouldn't be as glorious without them. My gratitude for those volunteers knows no bounds. Thank you. Maybe after today you may also feel called to serve in one of these roles on our team. Today after this service, you will have the opportunity to learn more about all of our teams but I would like to take this opportunity to briefly share a few items on the worshiping team agenda:

- In the past year we have worked with other teams to complete a congregational survey, as well as listening sessions regarding service times.
- We decorated Bethel for the Christmas holiday, helped the media ministry board to forward the new lighting project here in the sanctuary
- We selected and procured the new processional cross.

- Looking ahead, the worshiping team is excitedly working with a talented artist from whom they have commissioned new paraments or banners that will brighten our walls in the sanctuary in a few short weeks, just in time for Easter. I hope you all join us for Easter and come back and see them.

In addition to how we are called to serve during our worship services, I'm sure Margie would like to share how the serving team is called to support even more ministries her at Bethel.

(Margie) There are currently more than 40 different ministries or ways to serve, opportunities both within Bethel and beyond Bethel.

- Do you like to knit or crochet? There is a prayer shawl ministry that brings hope to those who are sick, grieving, or struggling in some way.
- The caring team ministry brings the gift of hospitality, prayers and love to people who cannot leave their home without a lot of effort.
- When a disaster strikes in our community, like the flooding we had last August, there is LUAD (Lutherans United After Disaster) where people volunteer to do, whatever it takes, to lighten the load. Like shoveling mud out of the basements after the water had subsided.
- Perhaps you see a need in our community or in our world that needs a response. That is how our Rwanda Ministry began. Currently, we have nine people in Rwanda who are focusing on education, including bringing Potter's for Peace, which provides access to safe water both locally produced with ceramic water filters. Jennifer Maley, a Bethel Horizons potter and artist, was able to join this important work with the help of a Bethel endowment grant.
- The Circle of Love project started in 1998 as a Sunday School mission project. Bethel kids collected supplies and much needed items to send to kids and their families who live in the Borianka region of the Ukraine an area that has been impacted by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster that happened in 1986. We learned about the chronic radiation that this community endures each and every day and its impact on children. And the Holy Spirit started working. In the summer of 2000, with a grant from the Bethel

endowment foundation, we were able to bring children to Madison for six weeks with an interpreter and Ludvillia the Borianka community center director. The following May, 7 of us went to Ukraine to evaluate the program. I stayed with the Forsanko family. Helena and Sergio and their children. Their daughter Katya had come to Madison the summer before. While there, Helena's mother came for a visit. She asked many questions about the Circle of Love project. And through an interpreter I was able to share our story. With tears streaming down her face, this grandmother asked me: Why would you do this for my granddaughter? I was able to share on behalf of Bethel, we are the hands and feet of Jesus. It is our honor to serve Katya and the other children of Borianka. It was a humbling spirit-filled moment. The Circle of Love golf outing is a way to fund this ministry. This year is the 19th golf outing. Last year the Circle of Love outing expanded to include our resettlement ministry. \$15,000 was raised, coupled with the money from the Bethel estate sales, toward a new Habitat for Humanity home for one of our Bhutanese families. This year our circle expands again. Money raised from the golf outing will go to Bethel Horizons to help celebrate the 50th Anniversary of this amazing camp and retreat center. The Holy Spirit continues to work in Borianka, Ukraine. The community center started their own Circle of Love reaching out to help children in an orphanage nearby. They also welcome refugees from Eastern Ukraine who are fleeing the Soviet take-over of Crimea.

To see the Holy Spirit at work in and through Bethel members gives us response for sure. The connection between worship and serving is powerful. And our gratitude for God's amazing grace and amazing love is like a circle. A circle of worship and service. You can't have one without the other.

We invite each of you to join all five ministry teams after the service in the Emmaus Room. We welcome the opportunity to visit with you so together we can listen to the Holy Spirit and figure out where God is leading Bethel and you. Thank you.

May the grace of God continue to empower each one of you, each one of us and beyond our walls, that we may

by the power of the Holy Spirit touch the lives of others with God's amazing grace.