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Bittersweetness  
Georgetown Presbyterian Church

September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2022  
Luke 15:1-10  
Washington, D.C.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So Jesus told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

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Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them. That was an issue for some. Jesus, this man who was known for his power and his miracles and his preaching – he could eat with anyone. Rulers, philosophers, poets, politicians, they could all be at his table. And yet Jesus did not discriminate based on such metrics of success and influence and power. Jesus did entertain powerful people and thinkers, but he also ate with the unclean, the poor, the people some labeled as “sinners”. Something about this category was offensive and Jesus was asked to justify his guest list.

Jesus’s response is fascinating – because he could have replied to his accusers, ‘mind your own business’ or ‘the sinners just tell better stories at dinner’ or even ‘I am trying to save these people.’ Instead, Jesus tells two stories about finding joy. In the first story, one sheep in a flock of one hundred is lost and when it is found there is rejoicing. In the second story, one coin of ten is lost and when it is found there is rejoicing. In both stories, there is loss and there is joy. Jesus pairs the emotions together. With the stories Jesus tell his objectors that life is much more complex than good vs evil or “sinner” vs “righteous”. The parables have nothing to do with Jesus’ dinner guests, but they have everything to do with how Jesus views the world.

Susan Cain, the author of *Quiet*, a book about introversion, recently wrote another book called *Bittersweetness*. Bittersweetness describes a way of looking at and experiencing the world. Cain defines bittersweetness as a kind of state of mind where you are very attuned to the way in which joy and sorrow in this world are forever paired. Cain says with bittersweetness there is a realization that you do not really get to have one without the other. An example she gives is, walking your child down the aisle – it is bittersweet. There is joy but there is loss. And there could not be loss without deep love and so there is joy for the love. The emotions are intertwined and inseparable. Her Majesty, the late Queen of England, famously said, “Grief was the price we pay for love.”

She knew much about bittersweetness, and I know many people throughout the world feel those inseparable emotions now with the news of her death.

Susan Cain advocates that we should be open to the things that are bittersweet – this means being open and aware of joy and sorrow and fragility and beauty. Living this way means you can embrace the realization that everyone and everything we love will not be here forever. As painful as it is, somehow that knowledge is able to connect us to depth and beauty and holiness. There is a bittersweetness in Jesus' parables. Jesus is talking about loss and then connecting it to joy. The sheep was lost, the coin was lost and with desperation the search began. These were prized possessions. Life would not be the same without them. This is how Jesus felt about his dinner guests – they were his prized possessions and spending time with them gave him joy because he knew their worth. There is this lesson, Jesus is teaching, that at any moment one of our prized possessions could be lost and we could spend the rest of our lives without that person or without that thing. And so, with that realization there was profound joy for having had it – having experienced it – having been blessed by it. When we realize life is fragile then we appreciate things on a profoundly deeper layer, and it is bittersweet.

Jesus when was questioned about his choice of dinner guests, he responded by saying that his guests brought him joy. The “sinners” and the “tax collectors” were people with stories and sins and pain and loves and hopes. Jesus wanted to know them and hear them and share with them and rejoice with them in all that was bittersweet about their lives and connect it things of meaning and value. There was this shared humanity with them and in that shared humanity, the pain and loss and even the anticipation of death – there was a joyfulness. It seems hard to understand and yet when you go through things with people you form bonds that do bring meaning and connection and those things are the seeds of real joy.

I think on this kick-off Sunday we need to be cognizant to the bittersweetness of this day. There is joy in kicking things off again for the church, Sunday School and the choir and our groups and classes and annual events. But the joy is different than it was before the pandemic. It is less ‘rah-rah go Jesus’ and more just gratitude to be here. Two and a half years of covid has changed us. We have been through hardships and losses of different shapes and sizes, from the youngest to the oldest - we do not come here unchanged. We have stories to tell about what we lost and what we found. Susan Cain's theory would be that those things we have gone through can be used to connect us and bring us together in deeper ways. On this kick-off Sunday, we can rejoice to be connected because we know what is like to be separated. We can rejoice to worship in person because we know what it is like to be isolated. We can rejoice to rub shoulders with friends and strangers alike because we know what it was like to be lonely and afraid. We felt loss and now we feel joy. Not naïve happiness but well-earned joy. It is bittersweet because we never would wish it to have happened but now, we have this bond.

When we appreciate the bittersweetness of life it connects us to our common humanity – this strange state of being human and going through things and growing up and losing people and enduring trials and feeling pain and experiencing love and witnessing beauty and feeling joy. These things make us human and connecting with the emotions and the experiences, both the good ones and the hard ones, makes us realize we are not alone. Jesus wanted us to know that we are not alone. Emmanuel – God with us. With us in it all – the good, the bad, and the ugly.

It must be noted that today, of course, is a day of painful memories for our country, on the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of 9-11. I was struck by the thought this week that some people here, young adults and younger worshippers may not have been alive or aware of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. That is a new season for our country when that event for some is not a lived experience, but a story that has been passed down. Every year around 9-11, I hear new stories from church members about what their experience was like being in Washington on that day. These are stories of pain and fear and disruption and yet so often they are followed by actions undertaken for the sake of the common good. So many people felt inspired to make meaning out of that chaos. They say that after 9-11 the number of applications for people to become fire fighters went through the roof.

It was the same after the pandemic, medical and nursing school applications soared. People wanted to serve, to make a difference, to confront the pain by making meaning out of it. When we confront the pain and the sadness – we can transform them. That is the kind of life we are called to live in Christ. Not just ‘happy go lucky, Christian cheerfulness’ all day long but people who can confront the real, the hard, the fragile and transmute those things into service, into connection, into beauty. Jesus was all about taking what was broken and disfigured and making it meaningful and holy. Jesus’s life was a sacrifice for humanity – broken open for the sake of the world – he brought together pain and joy in his own life – for our sakes. This is divine bittersweetness – God so loved the world – that God would give us Jesus – for us, the sinners, so that we might not be alone, so that we might be redeemed.

Susan Cain describes a time of bittersweetness in her own life. It was a point in her children’s life when she was spending time with them at night tucking them in and reading to them, and in this time together, they were being open and asking important questions and it was precious time. She also was bringing her phone in the room with her and answering when someone called or reading texts or checking her emails. And then she had this bittersweet thought that this could be the last night they were able to do bedtime ritual together. She did not know if they would have another bedtime, she might not be there, they might not be there. She said she did not feel morbid about it but just aware of the fragility of life and preciousness of time. And so, she stopped taking her phone in with her.

Jesus was remarkable about how he used his time with great intentionality – Jesus did not have a long life or a long ministry, but his impact was infinite. Jesus was able to connect with the sorrows and the joys of human existence and make meaning of out this life of ours because he was fully present, fully alive, fully open to the emotions and the beauty and the divine.

As we begin this year as a church, I would like us to embrace the joyful mindset of Jesus – he was aware of the sins and the death and the pain of this world, but he would laugh and rejoice and be grateful for the world and all that was in it. Jesus spent his time wisely. He celebrated what was good and beautiful and holy. He gave sinners second chances; he loved people who had nothing to share with him and he loved people with every material possession available to them. Jesus lived as one who could take pain and turn it into a creative offering for the world. He lived as one who cherished the lives of the people around him – finding joy in their very beings.

The pandemic caused a disruption to our church, there has been loss. But after loss comes rejoicing. Not naïve rejoicing but true joy because we have felt pain and loss and grief, but God

has held us. Even when we felt far apart, God's love would not leave us, God's love kept us connected.

Today, we begin again. Kicking off the church year, by striving to be open to God and open to each other. We give thanks to Jesus who welcomed us to the table and find joy in our presence. Our hearts overflow with gratitude!

This is the day that the Lord has made, bittersweet as it may be, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Amen.