

Not long ago, thanks to a woman named Marie Kondo, a lot of people were talking about joy because of her unique method of decluttering homes and rooms. Her simple method is: if an item – be it a book or a piece of clothing, or a picture on the wall, or a knick-knack on a shelf, doesn't give you joy, then give it away or throw it out. This concept became somewhat controversial, or at least contested, mostly because there are some things we need to hang on to whether they give us joy or not: like legal documents, or tools we need for work or study, food preparation and clean up, you get the idea. Despite this controversy, there were some people who appreciated Ms. Kondo's decluttering method because it did get people to think about the reality of joy.

And joy, it seems to me, is what Jesus' two parables are all about in today's Gospel lesson. Even though historically the emphasis on these parables seems to have been on the parts about what is lost. Some of you may be familiar with these parables and how they are often referred to as the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin. But parables are not intended to be simple allegories, and can have multiple layers of meanings, and sometimes putting titles on them can influence our interpretation, and perhaps miss what Jesus may have been getting at or hoping his listeners would hear in the parables he told. These parables could also be called the parable of the found sheep and the found coin, or, if I were going to title them, I'd call them the parables of shared joy.

When looking at the parables Jesus told, I believe it is also important to be aware of the context in which he told them. Before Jesus launched into the telling of the two little stories about a shepherd and a woman who celebrate, we heard the author of Luke's Gospel tell us Jesus had overheard the complaints of some Pharisees. It seems there was something more to the Pharisees' complaints than just not liking what they were seeing. They may have been trying to discredit Jesus by pointing out who he hung out with. Maybe they were jealous, after all, earlier in Luke's Gospel we heard Jesus went to the house of a Pharisee for dinner, so he didn't eat exclusively with people of ill repute. He ate with everyone. The author of Luke may be trying to tell us something about the complaints of the Pharisees, they weren't just unhappy, they were engaging in an Old Testament practice called murmuring. In the Bible, murmuring isn't a soft whispering sound, like the definition you will find in most dictionaries. In the Bible, murmuring was more nefarious. It is featured quite prominently in the Exodus story, when the people of God complained against Moses and God for bringing them into the wilderness. Their complaints weren't just

expressions of unhappiness or discomfort, they were malicious attempts to stir up the community against Moses, to form a new community based on negativity, discontent, and anger against God instead of the community formed in freedom, specifically the freedom from the oppressive powers of Egypt God wanted Moses to form God's people into.

It is quite possible the author of Luke's Gospel wanted those of us reading his words to hear echoes of that story in the murmuring complaints of the Pharisees, because the parables about joy appear to be a direct response to those complaints.

Which is why we can get misdirected if we focus on the lost in these parables instead of the reaction of the characters -the shepherd and woman - when found what they were looking for: joy. One of the possible reasons why joy can be harder to focus on than what is lost may be because there can be many definitions of joy, and joy can be mistaken for happiness or delight. Joy is not the same thing as happiness. Happiness is something we often play a part in creating such as getting a good grade or hearing praise from a parent, professor, or boss. Or getting a good deal on something we want to purchase. Those things can make us feel happy. But that feeling, as good as it is, is not joy. Joy is something bigger, and wilder, and is beyond our control. Joy, like C.S. Lewis writes, is something that overtakes us. Joy is a connection to something larger than ourselves. People sometimes experience joy when they see a stunning sight in nature: like majestic mountain ranges, or the ocean, or just standing in the middle of quiet forest as the sunlight filters through a green canopy of leaves.

There is more to joy than the beauty of nature. Joy is sometimes felt when two people become brave enough to be so vulnerable to each other that they swear there are moments when they can't sense the distance between them.

And of course, there is the joy that the Rt. Rev. Porter Taylor, bishop of the Diocese of Western North Carolina calls "the central component to the Christian life." Bishop Taylor further describes joy as a connection between God and people and the connection between each other another; "the glue of the universe", as it were. This connection is what Jesus came to reestablish, and to strengthen through his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus came not out of anger, or worry, or disappointment, Jesus came to bring us joy, what C.S. Lewis calls a type of love. How could we understand such love? In the parables from today's Gospel, Jesus compared it to that feeling of finding not only what you had been looking for, but something unexpected, and so much larger than yourself you can't keep it to yourself, you just have to share it, so you invite all your friends over and you celebrate.

That's joy. Can you see how it is so much larger than happiness? In theory the cost of the celebrations in the parables probably would have been much more than the financial value of a single sheep or a coin. And it was never about the worth of the sheep or the coin, because this kind of love – because joy - doesn't see things or people that way. All are valued because all are loved.

Joy is the love of God in Christ. Joy is what God feels whenever any person turns away from the selfish desires of ego or violent expressions of fear or murmurings of angst and turns towards God and living the way that shares the love of God with each other and the world. That is what it means to repent, to turn away from sin, from believing there is no one more important in the world than yourself, and turn toward God. As we heard in Paul's first letter to Timothy, which was our second reading this morning, Paul himself felt joy when he turned from persecuting followers of Jesus into a follower of Jesus himself.

And joy, we heard in the parables, is something to be shared and participate in. This doesn't look like wild abandon, or raucous giggling. Joy sometimes doesn't look happy. According to people like the retired Archbishop of South Africa Desmond Tutu, joy is sometimes suffering as he spoke out against the racism and segregation in the South African apartheid. Joy can be what helps us through difficult times, because, remember, joy is that love that keeps us connected to God even when it is hard to feel it or see it.

Other times joy is celebrating with a good friend or family member even when you might be going through a difficult time. And joy can be part of a worship service like this one. If you don't hear anything else I say this morning, I hope you hear it gives God joy whenever any of us turn to God, even when it simply looks like coming to church to share in the joy of worship. God loves you so much and you being here gives God joy, and God wants to share that joy with us all, no matter who you are, and God's love is so abundant there is plenty to go around.

It can be so easy to forget this, to look at church attendance as mandatory, or something we don't have time for, or to use it as an opportunity to talk with someone about some item of church business, or for some other purpose, maybe like those Pharisees to remind folks you are unhappy about something. As New York Times columnist David Brooks has said, there seems to be a conspiracy against joy in our society, a society that focuses on the negative, or personal accomplishments, which might make it hard to see the joy in a worship service. As former bishop of Durham NT Wright has said, if a person doesn't understand the purpose of the celebration, they won't want to participate. Which is why sometimes even those most devoted followers of Jesus can appreciate the reminder of why we gather for worship on Sundays. It's not just about holding with tradition, or seeing our friends, or even

listening to beautiful music, hearing words of scripture, or a sermon, although those things are important parts of how we worship. But we must be careful not to confuse them with why we worship. The purpose for worship services is sharing the type of God's love called joy with God and each other so that we can take that joy back into the world and share it with whomever we meet and engage with during the week. It's as simple and beautiful and joyful as that.

Which is why I am not just being polite or hospitable when I greet you all after the opening hymn every Sunday morning – I am reminding myself and hopefully all of you that it truly is a joy to be together to worship: to live the words of the parables we heard, to share a love of God so big and so good and so wildly beautiful we can't keep it to ourselves, we have to share it, as God shares it with us, which why we often call our church service a celebration, and is why at the end of the service I say our celebration is ending, and our service, our sharing our God's joy is just beginning.