



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"The Joy of Jesus" - Worship the King Advent Series

The Rev. Steve Peich

**L**uke 15:1-7 - *Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Him (Jesus). And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes 'sinners' and eats with them."*

*So He told them this parable:  
4 "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. 6 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.'*

*7 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.*

Today we continue our Advent series, "Worship the King" and I want us to look at a story that vividly expresses a great part of the message, meaning, and mission of Christmas—a story that brings out the Joy of Jesus toward us, even the worst of us.

Christmas is one of the few times you may get to see a movie about Jesus on TV, but what I have

noticed over the years is that the Jesus in movies often comes off a little too mellow for me. It's like He looks super serious or super chill no matter what is going on. It's like He is taking heavy doses of Prozac.

With a guy like this you would get the impression Jesus hardly ever cracks a smile. We don't normally envision Jesus smiling broadly, being animated when He tells a story, or just plain cracking up over something someone said. Maybe it's because we see the world as so hopelessly sinful we figure if Jesus is feeling anything it must be anger or at best sorrow. But that's not exactly how the Bible portrays Jesus in our story in Luke 15.

I want to slowly go back over the events of the story we just read so we can grasp the profound activity of what is going on here; activities so important it can really change our experience and understanding of Christmas.

As you read a few moments ago there are two groups of people referred to in this story: The Tax Collectors and Sinners, and then the Pharisees and Scribes.

The Pharisees and scribes were scholars of their day concerning the Laws of God and were strict rule-keepers about

God's ways. Some scholars interpret the word Pharisee to mean "the separate one," separated in the sense of being separate from sinful ways and sinful people. They saw this notion of being separate as a godly way to be faithful to God.

They numbered about 6,000 men during Jesus' lifetime and, of course, there were also more than a few scribes.

These Jewish leaders believed that the Law of God, or what they called The Torah, contained 613 commandments. They used a metaphor for the Torah calling it the "Garden of God" because it was so beautiful.

Now because the Pharisees and Scribes were so committed to living meticulously by these laws they created what they called a "Hedge" around this Garden. That means they created *more* rules and rituals to keep them completely out of range from breaking the laws of the Garden. They didn't want any possibility of breaking them either by accident or ignorance.

This Hedge consisted of up to 1,500 additional man-made laws added to the former commandments. That now makes up more than 2,110 laws to follow.

Some of these Hedge laws make you scratch your head in our modern world. For example, the seventh day of the week for the Jews was called the Sabbath, which means rest so people were not to work on the Sabbath.

Now to make sure work didn't happen, the religious leaders came up with "Hedges" around that simple rule. This is one of them: you can't eat an egg from a chicken that laid an egg on the Sabbath because laying an egg was considered work on the Sabbath.

Part of the problem was they started to equate the Hedge with the Garden. In other words, their rules were on par with God's rules. So somewhere in this "Hedge" it became "sinful" to eat with irreligious people—people like Tax Collectors and "Sinners".

To be fair, we have to understand that people who were tax collectors and sinners were genuinely lousy people. Tax collectors were Jewish guys who collected monies at exorbitant rates from other Jewish people. It was bad enough to rip off your own Jewish brothers, but worse than that was that a good chunk of those taxes were given to Rome. And it was this kind of action made them despicable in the eyes of the Jewish people, because such action amounted to treason.

After all, Rome was a foreign, occupying force that was sometimes brutal in enforcing its power. If anyone was to even talk of opposing the rule of Rome they were quickly crucified. Imagine what it would feel like if you knew that the money you gave to a fellow American went directly into the hands of people who want to oppress us, who want to harm us, and would crucify us if they so chose? Can you imagine that the

money you had to pay the government went to supporting ISIS? To be honest, that wouldn't sit too well with me. Now you know why they were considered despicable.

Now the word "Sinners" in our story weren't just people who made some mistakes here or there. This word was the label Jewish people used to refer to the preeminently sinful. They were the irreligious, the wicked, low-lives, the disreputable and the damned (which sounds like a lot of the guys I went to high school with back in Jersey!).

But the thing is these are the very people whom Jesus "welcomes" (v. 2) — not simply tolerates, but welcomes and joyfully seeks out. And He welcomes a lot of them. Look at verse 1: "*All the tax collectors (and sinners) were coming to listen to Jesus.*" In other words, this was not a small crowd or infrequent scenario. Apparently this was characteristic of Jesus' life and ministry.

The word "welcome", at its root, means to look forward to something and it means to receive others with friendliness and give a favorable embrace; it connotes something that is very warm, joyful, and eager. In other words, to welcome was to eagerly look forward to favorably embrace other people with friendliness.

In this scene we see that part of how Jesus welcomed them was by sharing meals with them, and this is a big part of what ticks off the Pharisees and Scribes. That's because in their ancient context shared meals symbolized shared lives and relational closeness. To invite a man to a meal was to honor them and raise their social

value. It was a means to create peace and reconciliation.

And from what we can see Jesus didn't grit His teeth to get through a meal with them; (kind of like how some folks might feel when their in-laws come over for Christmas: "I can't wait till this meal is over and they go home!" (just kidding). By every indication Jesus was *enthusiastic* to eat with them and hang out with them.

And by the way, notice that Jesus does not wait until tax collectors and sinners get their act together before He will have a meal with them. Christ is expressing value towards them. He is raising their social value, even while they are *still* sinners and tax collectors.

And this is exactly the kind of thing that led the tax collectors and scribes to grumble (verse 2, monku, monku, monku). Yet Jesus is going through great pains to express that despite all the appearances to the contrary, tax collectors and sinners are valuable and belong to God and God wants them back. And He will go out of His way and endure trouble to bring them back—and He does it with great joy.

And to make that point Jesus tells a parable. Let's quickly review it: So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> "*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?*"

<sup>5</sup> *When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.* <sup>6</sup> *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.'*

**J**ust 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.' He's not trying to blast the Pharisees here. Jesus is trying to win them over to His view of sinners.

As you can hear In this story we encounter a man, a shepherd, who oversees 100 sheep and one of these sheep gets lost. Like many of us, somewhere in its journey this sheep decided to follow another path than the one the shepherd was on—a path that probably seemed right a first but eventually led him astray and away from the love and protection of the shepherd. (Can you relate?)

Of course, the sheep probably didn't even know it was lost, but here's the thing: that didn't matter to the shepherd. The shepherd didn't wait until the sheep came to this realization on its own. No, this shepherd zealously sought out that lost and wandering sheep.

When he finds this sheep, this sheep who left *Him*, what does it say happened? "When He found the sheep he chewed out the sheep!" No that didn't happen. "He whacked the sheep" or "He gave the sheep stink eye." These didn't happen either. Perhaps He said under his breath as he finds and carries the sheep, "You dumb animal, why did you take off like that? I'm sick and tired of this, what a pain to carry you."

No, it says he *rejoices!* (verse 5). No scolding, no stink eye, no harsh treatment—just rejoicing. This is grace. This is love. This is Christmas! So hear this, I want us to be clear this morning about this one thing: God's first reaction to sinners and wanderers is grace, not condemnation. It's love, not disappointment.

The Bible tells us in the book of Romans that "God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still (wandering, lost, misled) sinners, Christ died for us." This is what the Bible calls the Good News of God.

What has been said about you when you wander or when you blow it? What do you say to *yourself* when you blow it? Have you ever said, "You moron, you're so stupid! That was so dumb." Where does that come from? That's not from the Lord. That kind of self-talk often comes out of a journey where we didn't experience a whole lot of grace from the people we valued when we blew it. Anyone grow up with a critical or condemning voice for every little thing you did?

Let me drill down deeper about what this little parable implies and what the Pharisees and Scribes and more than a few Christians can't get.

First of all, the deepest truth about you is *not* that you are a sinner. We are in fact sinners, but that is not the *deepest* truth about us. I think Scripture makes it clear that the deepest truth about every person, even the worst of us is: we are sacred, we are loved with an unbreakable love, and we are created for a divine purpose. We may not live into any of that all of that, maybe even for decades, but it remains true about each of us nonetheless.

Listen to writer Preston Sprinkle as he makes a similar point: "God loves you because of who He is and because of what Christ has done (not you). Whether you are depressed, suicidal, underweight, overweight, good-looking, ugly, dumb, smart, popular, socially rejected, happily married, divorced, physically fit,

physically disabled, funny, dull... you have won the heart of God because you are human."

Do we believe this? Do we believe this about the gossip, that backbiter, that alcoholic, that porn addict, that radical jihadist, etc. Do we believe that they have won the heart of God by the sheer fact that they are human? Or is there a special category in our minds that they are not quite human, not quite loved? Do you know today that *you* have "won the heart of God" or do you struggle with internalizing this amazing truth?

Look, here's reality: people are not always good. I'm not always good. And I hate to break it to you, but *you're* not always good. But we are *always sacred* and that little fact changes everything.

And because we are basically sacred it makes sin not simply bad, but tragic. Let me elaborate. When I first came to Hawaii in 1988 I was absolutely awed at the sheer beauty of this place. I remember the first time my wife Dyne took me to eastern Oahu. She drove up past Hawaii Kai and then down into a crater. She soon walked me up to the edge of that crater. And when I looked down I beheld Hanauma Bay for the very first time! You talk about a WOW! Moment.

In the years since that first view of Hanauma Bay Hawaii has created lots of rules to make sure WOW! will always be associated with that place. It got me thinking, imagine one day in the future where you came to the edge of that crater and you saw a large oil slick in the shallow snorkeling area? Or you smelled raw sewage and you saw garbage piled high and deep on the beach.

What would be your visceral response in that experience of Hanauma Bay? Shock, horror, anger, but eventually I bet you what you would feel most deeply is *heartbroken*. And you wouldn't be heartbroken because some park rules were violated, but because indescribable beauty, something almost sacred, had been tragically desecrated.

My point is, pollution in a place like Hanauma Bay, is not only bad or illegal, it's tragic; it's heartbreaking because of the beauty that is that place. And as beautiful as Hanauma Bay is it's nothing compared to the human soul. Yet how many of us can see its splendor and respect its beauty? Because when we can, we can then understand the tragedy of sin.

By all the harsh rhetoric I hear about people these days, from politicians, pundits, and even pastors, I wonder if we have forgotten the WOW! and beauty of every human life; Gay or Straight, Legal or Illegal, Hindu or Muslim, Liberal or Conservative. Is there still WOW! in our minds about every person no matter who or what they are?

If we could see the soul of others through God's eyes we would be breathless in the face of its splendor. Christian writer, C.S. Lewis, touches on this in one of his writings: "Remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, (viz. if you could see the essence of that being). There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal... (It) is IM-mortals whom we work with, joke with, marry, snub, and exploit. Next to the blessed sacrament itself, your neighbor (whoever they are) is the

holiest object presented to your senses."

Can you hear the WOW! the sacred beauty of people in Lewis' words?

And this is what the Pharisees and Scribes failed to remember, what they failed to see, the WOW and beauty of every human life however far they have strayed from God.

This is also why, in part, Christmas happened in the first place...because Jesus wanted to restore the intended beauty of our lives, which begins as we give our lives to Him, the creator of Life and Beauty.

Why do I put it in these kinds of terms? It comes out of some of my favorite verses that describes the mission and purpose of the work of the Messiah (Jesus), and about what His Coming was all about, is in Isaiah 61:1-3. I will just read part of it: *"The Lord has anointed Me (which we know now to be Jesus) to preach good news to the oppressed... to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives...To bestow a crown of Beauty instead of Ashes, the oil of Gladness instead of Mourning, a garment of Praise instead of a spirit of Despair. They (those in despair, mourning, and ashes) will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of God's splendor."*

Isn't it great to know that right here and now for you who may be in ashes or despair, that God's great desire is not to slam you or even condemn you, but to change you so that you to display His splendor to the world?

Again, this is why sinfulness is not just wrong, it's also

heartbreaking, sorrowful, and tragic.

Perhaps to make this point more vividly, I want to show you some pictures of an outright sinner, an absolute lawbreaker. She is a woman who violates her own sacred essence and so much of what is sacred to God. And then I want you to get in touch with what you feel about this sinner. She was arrested for drug use and prostitution, pretty sinful stuff.

This is the girl after her first arrest. And here is the second, third, and the fourth (pictures of a woman looking increasingly worn out and tattered). Now let me ask you something if you were a policeman, what would you see? Likely a lawbreaker. But if you were her father what do you see? Do you see a lawbreaker? Or do you see a heartbreaking, gut-wrenching tragedy?

Do you just see the sin? Or do you also see the tragedy? Just be with these images for a moment. Would you invite her to dinner? But this is exactly whom Jesus did invite and welcome and raised their social value.

The way Jesus responds to sin in another situation crystallizes this point about tragedy. In the last week of His life when Jesus came to Jerusalem and looked over it - rebellious Jerusalem, hypocritical Jerusalem, corrupt Jerusalem, Christ hating Jerusalem - and what was Jesus' response to such a sinful Jerusalem? It was simply to cry. Luke 19.41: As Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept over it..." The word, "wept" in Greek (the original language of the New Testament) means to really wail with the emphasis upon the noise accompanying the weeping.

**W**hy am I driving home this point so strongly? Because when we frame sin as a human tragedy maybe it will change our speech and our approach toward sin and sinners. You see we tend to vilify law-breakers, but we want to help those who live tragically. As Jenny Hopley shared this morning when she saw tragedy in Houston, she just wanted to do nothing but help.

Now what if we looked at that young woman again from the standpoint of her salvation journey through Christ as being one of turning “ashes to beauty” and “despair into praise”? Maybe it’s a process like this (pictures of the woman going back to her first arrest, when she looks far more together and beautiful).

What does that feel like? What does it feel like to see the restoration of her beauty, the restoration of who she was meant to be?

What if this was a big part of Christmas meaning for you this year: to lead you back up into your God ordained beauty and glory, to restore *you* to the image of God?

And for those of us who already follow Christ, wouldn’t we want to be a part of making that happen in the world instead of being busy condemning people. We can make that happen *if* we have the eyes, the mind, and the heart of Jesus toward sinners and sin.

Jesus’ welcoming and eating with the worst of society shouts to us there is always more to us than the sum total of our sin and brokenness. He doesn’t ignore our sin they are serious business. It’s why He went to the cross and died for us. But to Him our sins are not the sum total of our lives, there’s

always more. There is always more to the drug addict than his drug addiction. There is always more to the homeless person, than their disheveled look and smell. There is always more to the Muslim than his faith. There is always more to the illegal immigrant than his illegalities.

There is always more *to all of us* than our actions. So can we during this Christmas season through Christ see “The More” in others and see what He sees?

Some of the sinners and tax collectors changed and eventually followed Jesus not because the rules around them finally broke them down and they repented. They changed because they experienced something through the love and teachings of Jesus, that even when He spoke of sin it didn’t make them run away.

Sin goes away in our world not simply because we are instituting more rules around the rules (like the Scribes and Pharisees), but it goes away because sinners are finding grace and truth and life through the welcome and embrace of Jesus. And now, today, you and I are His embrace to a sinful and broken world.

Yes, there will be a day of judgment, but today is *not* that day. Today is the day of salvation.

If you need to experience the love and grace of Jesus in your life I want you to consider inviting Him into your life right now. Invite Him into your ashes, into your despair, into your sinful heart you may have because He loves you and He is seeking after you. Let Him turn your ashes to beauty and despair into praise so that through Him you display the glory of God to others.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org) The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)