

## ***Recognizing Miracles***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

April 30, 2023 – The Fourth Sunday of Eastertide

Text: Luke 15:8-10

Today's story from Luke's Gospel is a short and simple one, immediately relatable to everyone who hears or reads it. This story is about the universal experience of losing something and tearing apart your entire house to find it. How many of us have had this experience? (*Pause for responses*) What are you usually looking for when this happens? (*Pause*) In our house this happens regularly. I am usually looking for my cell phone charger. Peter is usually looking for his reading glasses. Jack, come to think of it, rarely loses anything. Or, if he does, he doesn't admit it.

Peter and I visited with Amanda and Reese just yesterday and Reese misplaced this teeny tiny figurine from *Frozen II*. This teeny tiny character called Bruni is the fire spirit. Reese has several of them but this one is less than an inch in size. He lost it while playing and skeptical Gramma was convinced it had to be gone forever. Then I watched Amanda conduct a literal grid search of the living room where Reese had been playing, taking all the cushions and pillows off the couch to no avail. Then she suggested Reese go to the last place he remembered being with the toy in his hand. He took off for the kitchen and BINGO, there it was. I was impressed and warned them they would be a sermon illustration today as we consider the woman and her lost coin. And here we are.

When we lose something important to us – for Reese a beloved toy, for the woman a precious coin needed to purchase

basics for her family – we will search for it until we find it. Some of us – like me in Reese’s search for the teeny tiny toy – search even though we are convinced we will never find what we are looking for. We are ready to give up the item as lost even before we start to look in earnest. Some of us – like the woman and Amanda – are confident the lost item will be located if only we search patiently and diligently. When you stop to think about it, this comes down to a difference in one’s degree of hope. Are you someone who hopes, but pessimistically? Someone who wants to believe the lost item will be found but personal experience and a lifetime of unrecovered lost items makes our hope flimsy at best? Or are you someone who is calmly convinced that if you give that search all you’ve got, the lost item will be found? This is full-throated, determined hope that never surrenders to reason or pessimism.

This is exactly the point of today’s story – which is one of Jesus’ short parables. What happens when the woman finds her lost coin? This is the key part of the story too often skimmed over because it’s not something any of us would ever do. I mean, who invites over all the friends and neighbors saying, “rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost!” Come on over for a party because I found a lost coin and got my house super clean because of it!! Let’s celebrate! Let’s stop to think about that image for a minute because that is the key moment of the whole story. This woman throws a party because her lost coin has been found, *due to her own efforts*. She lost it. She found it. She wants to celebrate, and she wants the people she cares about to celebrate with her. Okay, seems like an odd reason for a party but, okay. I have never been to a lost coin found party myself, but

it could happen. Maybe it has happened and I just didn't know it. Maybe I have been celebrating with someone who was so happy that something they lost had been found, but they just never mentioned that was the reason for their joyful celebration. Hmm. Something to ponder...

But back to our story. Remember, this is a parable, a special story used by Jesus to illustrate a point. In this case, his point is that this same kind of rejoicing the woman experiences when she finds her lost coin is exactly the same kind of rejoicing God experiences when one sinner repents. Or to put in words more familiar, this is the joy God experiences when one person asks for forgiveness when they have done something wrong. There is so much to unpack here in this one phrase. First, this parable tells us one very important thing about God that we seldom stop to process completely, and it is simply this – God is always paying attention. To each of us. All the time. That's impossible, we think. No one could do that!! That's right. No one person could. But God is not a human being. God is God, infinite in time and space, everywhere all the time. God IS always paying attention.

This parable also tells us something else about God. It tells us that God values repentance. Repentance requires us – you and me – to be paying attention to what we do, and how sometimes, even without intending to, we do the wrong thing. We hurt people. We anger people. Sometimes we even anger ourselves. And sometimes, too often perhaps, we let our anger and resentment get the best of us. We lose our tempers. We let our emotions run away with us. And we do the wrong thing, at the wrong time. God gets that about us. After all, God created us this way, to be human beings – the good, the bad, the flawed and

imperfect. This is all part of God's grand design for humanity. So our need for forgiveness, our need to say I'm sorry to someone or to God from time to time, is to be expected. The point Jesus is making in this parable is that what so pleases God that God rejoices is when WE recognize we need to be sorry, that we need to repent, that we need to apologize for something we have done. That recognition of our own wrong-doing, however big or small it might be, is the cause of God's rejoicing. The wrongdoing itself is not the point of this whole interaction at all. The act of our recognizing the wrongdoing and seeking to make it right, with God, with another person, with ourselves is what it most important here. It is so very important, and perhaps so rare, that when it does happen, God rejoices! *GOD* rejoices!!! Imagine that.

Again, let's think this through a little more. Let's say you do something that felt right at the time and then, in a calmer moment, you realize you did the wrong thing. Maybe even several wrong things. Let's say you are going shopping at McQuades on a Saturday because you weren't paying attention to the time. Suddenly it's 11:30 am and you realize you have to get to the store because your shelves are truly bare. So, you head to McQuades. Let's say you go to the one on Beach Street here in Westerly and let's say it was yesterday. Then, let's imagine you are knee-deep in traffic before you realize it is Duck Race Day and traffic is just stopped. Okay, you were irritated at yourself for losing track of time. Now you are super annoyed by the traffic and the stupid little yellow ducks clogging everything up. And you are annoyed that someone thought this was a good idea to raise money. Get where I'm going here? You've gone from being annoyed with yourself about needing to make this trip in the first place to being

really angry with the entire Ocean State Chamber of Commerce and their fund-raising activities which are threatening your entire day off.

Finally, traffic inches along and you are at last able to pull into McQuades and the lot is jammed. But, you find the exact spot you want and you intentionally cut someone off in order to get it. Horns are honked. Fingers are raised in suggestive ways. But you got the spot and you're in the store, really fuming now for all of the afore-mentioned reasons. You find most, but not all, of what you are looking for and head for the check-out lines which are way too long. Again, you inch your way forward only to have the cashier close out the drawer just as she or he should begin ringing your order. Granted this normally takes only a few minutes, but by now it's the timing of the whole thing that is just aggravating. You are grumpy. You are cranky. You are upset that this little bit of groceries costs so much. You are surly with the clerk. Finally, you get back to your car only to realize you still have your trunk filled with all the gardening stuff you packed for the outside work day at church leaving you to either rearrange the trunk or put the groceries in the back seat. Will these annoyances never end????? Then, pulling out of the parking lot, you again cut someone off because you just want to get home and out of all this annoying craziness once and for all! Horns honk. Fingers are raised in suggestive ways. But there is less traffic now and the drive home is smooth. You get the groceries safely back in the house and begin to put them away. And you think back on all the little moments you just experienced, all those little moments when you were not your best self.

Then, miracle of miracles, you recognize all those times when you did something to someone else which you truly regret now. You don't hate the Chamber of Commerce after all. You feel bad that you cut off that person who might have needed that parking spot closer to the door more than you did. You realize you were pretty awful to that grocery store cashier just trying to earn a paycheck. You wish you could apologize to all of them. To all of the people you glared at as you sat stuck in rubber duck traffic, to the police directing traffic you felt like screaming at, to every single person you practically mowed down while making your way through the store in your incredibly bad mood. You know you were a jerk and you are embarrassed. You are embarrassed by yourself and for yourself. You are sad and remorseful. What to do? Well, you obviously can't go back to all those people who were victimized by your lousy mood. But you can ask God to forgive you. You can ask God to bless each and everyone of those people who might have experienced your anger and impatience. You can visualize each one of them and pray for them, that the rest of their day is better than their encounter with you. Dear ones, you can do this. You should do this, knowing that when you do, God is rejoicing in heaven. Over you. And your ability to recognize and regret your own missteps in life.

This recognition of our missteps in life – those moments when we hurt or anger or diminish other people, intentionally or unintentionally – these moments of acknowledging that we were wrong, that we have in fact sinned and that we genuinely regret that sin – this is the stuff of miracles. Miracles? Yes, miracles. We humans are good, great even, at many things but NOT recognizing our own faults and shortcomings. We are not skilled

at pausing and saying to ourselves, “wow, did I really just say that? Did I really just do that?” It is not generally in our nature to be self-reflective. That we have to work at. And to work at it we first have to acknowledge that it’s something we need to do. This is the point at which the miracle happens, a miracle being something spontaneous and unexpected that changes the course of the moment. Recognizing in ourselves our own shortcomings is such a miraculous moment. This is why God rejoices in heaven when it happens. God rejoices because when we recognize these moments, God knows we have been listening to what Jesus taught us, what Jesus modeled for us. We have been paying attention to what it means to be a good, kind and loving person, to be a followers of Jesus. We realize we do care about doing the right thing, not just when we remember or when it’s convenient and easy. God rejoices because we know our own weaknesses, our own short-comings and we want to do better. We seek to repent. We seek forgiveness. We seek to change. And God rejoices.

That, dear ones, is so very rare. You have only to watch or read the news for a few minutes each day to realize that. We are confronted by so much ugliness resulting from the poor behavior of others each day. Too many people are quick with a mean word, quick to be unkind, quick to do the wrong thing. This breaks God’s heart, every single time. But when the miracle of recognition of wrongdoing in ourselves happens, and we allow ourselves to be transformed by that miraculous recognition, that is a moment which always, *always*, always prompts joy in heaven. And that, dear ones, is something pretty special. As you move through your days this week, I urge you to watch carefully for those miraculous moments when wrongdoing recognized become

moments of great rejoicing in heaven, and maybe even here as well. Look for opportunities to be transformed by forgiveness and repentance and dare to offer the same to others who have hurt you. It's one way that miracles happen every day. May you find your own such miracles this week. Amen.