When I had my bead store in Blacksburg, I traveled a couple of times to the Gem and Mineral show in Tuscon, Arizona, which is held every year for two weeks at the end of January and beginning of February (a nice time to be in Arizona). The show literally takes over the whole city of Tuscon – every conference center, fairground, hotel meeting room and vacant lot is filled with gem and bead vendors from all over the world with glorious wares to sell, every kind of gem and bead you can imagine. One year I discovered a vendor with stones I had never seen, Sleeping Beauty – a turquoise with the pure blue color of the Arizona sky, with little or no veining or webbing, the black lines you often see in turquoise. This particular stone is named after the mine in which it was found – the Sleeping Beauty mine in Globe, Arizona. I fell in love with the stone, some of which was drilled into beads that could be strung. Although they were kind of expensive as far as turquoise goes, I took home several strands. Once home, I made myself a multi-strand necklace which I thought was one of the most lovely necklaces I had ever made. I loved that necklace. I loved the smooth feel of the stones against my skin. I loved the brilliant blue of the stones. And I loved the compliments I got every time I wore it.

A few years later, Billy and I moved from Big Stone Gap to Floyd. We had a yard sale and took everything that didn't sell to the Goodwill store. We packed boxes in the fairly haphazard way that has characterized most of my moves. We took more stuff we didn't want or need to Goodwill. Once in Floyd, I decided to wear the Sleeping Beauty necklace. I couldn't find it, but figured it was in one of the plastic tubs under the carport. Billy and I looked through every bin but still couldn't find the necklace nor the mahogany jewelry box that held the necklace and several pieces of jewelry my mother had given me. I looked for that jewelry for years and, when we moved to our new house, I looked through everything again. Each time I tried in vain to find my necklace and my mom's jewelry, it upset me; all of it meant so much to me and I was willing to search high and low until I found it.

Jesus told some parables about lost things and searching. He talked about a shepherd with 100 sheep who left 99 of them behind when he went to look for the one that went missing and of a woman who had 10 coins, lost one and swept and searched until she found it. Jesus told these parables to a group of Pharisees and scribes who, it seemed, were becoming increasingly irritated by Jesus' behavior, by the fact that he seemed comfortable around who they considered sinners and even sat down and had meals with them.

In Luke's world there was a clear distinction given to those people who so habitually transgressed the ways of God that they were considered sinners in need of repentance. Others did not, hence the outrage of the Pharisees and scribes, the keepers of religious law. Here lies the cutting edge of the passage: Jesus sided with and embraced the very people the rest of religious society rejected. Then Jesus baited the righteous with these questions: “Which 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? And which of you, 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?” The answer from the Pharisees and scribes most likely would have been, “Do you think we're stupid? None of us would do those things. Who would leave ninety-nine sheep behind in danger of being attacked by predators to go find one sheep that had wandered away? Who would keep sweeping and sweeping when it's obvious she's not going to find the coin she so carelessly lost?” The shepherd only lost 1% of his herd, so why would he go after that one sheep? Why not cut his losses and get back to the 99 who needed him? The woman might have been more financially strapped if she lost 10% of all she had but even she would need to get back to her household duties and learn to live with what she had.

But that's not how Jesus' parables played out. Jesus speaks of a shepherd who is so excited at finding his lost sheep that he puts it across his shoulders and carries it home, calling to his friends and neighbors to come join a party in celebration of his sheep being returned to the fold. And the woman, she calls her friends and neighbors to come celebrate, too, holding a party that must have cost more than the one coin she found. Who would act like that? Who would risk making him or herself look like a fool, rejoicing over a found sheep or coin? Well, as it turns out, Jesus would. Jesus' foolish love includes everyone, from the religious righteous to those who lose their way, even if they do so intentionally. David Lose compares such love to a parent with more than one child. Lose writes: “There's a saying about parenthood that I've always found incredibly, and sometimes painfully, true: a parent is only as happy as his/her least happy child. Now think about this in relation to God our heavenly parent. No wonder Jesus says there is more joy in heaven when a single sinner repents than ninety-nine of the righteous. The more lost a person is, the greater cause for celebration when that one is found.”

Our Lord Jesus will search and search until he finds someone who is totally and completely lost and brings that one back by his side. Jesus will celebrate that homecoming every single time. But what about us, we who come to church, read the Bible, help people in need, we who so subtly slide into the thinking of the Pharisees? How could Jesus love someone who has lost his or her way - someone we might even call a loser – as much as Jesus loves us really good Christians? When we ask that question, it reveals a bias within us, a penchant for pushing others down so we can elevate ourselves in the eyes of our Lord. For just as parents cannot be happy until all their children are happy, children will continue to compete to be their parents' favorite.

The good news – or bad, depending on how you see it – is this. The extravagant joy of Christ welcoming sinners home is a joy God feels for us all. For all of us sin daily, hourly and fall short of what we and God want us to be. And all those sins, those thoughts and behaviors we think we hide under nice clothes and bright smiles? All those times we think of ourselves as losers but try desperately not to show it? God sees them all, knows them all and still, still God loves us with a wild abandon, thrilled beyond belief when we turn to God for help, for forgiveness, for acceptance and love. And when we treat others the way God treats us – with help, forgiveness, acceptance and love? When we invite others to join us at a table not owned by us by spread for us by our Lord? That's when the real rejoicing begins.

By the way, I never did find my Sleeping Beauty necklace or the jewelry case with my Mom's jewelry. I've stopped looking for I imagine they are now in the home of a lucky Goodwill employee. I have moved on for I have other things that occupy my days. Thank God for sticking with us, with never giving up until that day when Jesus finds us and carries us home on his shoulders, inviting everyone he sees to join the celebration party.

Amen.

*Pentecost 17C*

*September 11, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 15:1-10*