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In our Old Testament reading for today, we remember the legendary story of the Exodus, how Moses, with the help of God led the people of Israel out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. And we remember the many challenges Moses and the people had to overcome; the Pharaoh and his armies, the hardships of traveling through the wilderness, the concerns about where their food and water would come from, the fear of the unknown, and throughout this epic journey, the people had to learn to trust in God, to trust that God was always with them, that God would provide for them, that God was worthy of their praise.

Well, along the journey they stopped at the foot of Mount Sinai where Moses would receive the Ten Commandments, the law that would form the people of Israel. Scripture says he was gone 40 days. Well after Moses was gone for a little while, some of the people got a little anxious. Where is Moses? What's taking so long? We don't want to die out here? Someone or something has to calm our fears and set us on solid ground again. So they built something from their own hands, something tangible that they could see and touch, something that would hopefully give them more security than just the word of an unseen God, you know it's hard to live just by faith, and so the people created a calf made of gold and they began to celebrate, for now they had something, they had a Golden Calf to save them. I've always been intrigued by this story, because it demonstrates how little time it takes to be drawn off the path that God has placed before us.

They say if we do something consistently for 30 days it becomes a habit. And many people put this principle into practice when they go on a diet or an exercise program or a time management plan. But I'm wondering if we don't do something consistently, for let's say 40 days, do we then lose that habit?

What if we were to not attend a worship service for the next month, could we lose our faith in God, like the Israelites, and make something else our object of worship in just 40 days?

This is the beginning of football season and we all know how much attention that can get. Could following football replace our God in just 40 days? What about the pursuit of money, working an extra job, putting long hours into our careers?

How long would it take us to convince ourselves that don't really need to go to church to worship, that we can worship God alone just as well, and we could do it without having to get up, get dressed, drive in, get sermonized to, and be encouraged to give an offering.

As the numbers of un-churched keeps growing in our country, it's clear that other things have become the objects of our worship, and to insulate themselves from the truth,

more people view Christians as radical fanatics, as intolerant, insensitive, and self-righteous.

And in reaction to that view, I believe many Christians have become defensive and have become less than hospitable to guests and judgmental with those that don't share their views.

But that's not the church or the Christian faith that I know and believe in.

Jesus came to preach Good News to the poor, he came to heal the sick from their infirmities, he came to save the whole world. Jesus taught that all are valuable in the eyes of God.

One day the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders, came up to Jesus grumbling and complaining because Jesus was out of line with their way of doing things. He was not keeping company with the right people. He was hanging out with sinners, with undesirables, and he was even defiling himself by eating with them. So Jesus challenges them with a parable. He says, 'Which of you having 100 sheep, does not leave 99 of them in the wilderness, when one of them lost, and looks for that sheep until he finds it? And then when he finds it, lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home calls together all his friends and neighbors, saying to them "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost."

Now in case you hadn't noticed, this is not a story about how to be a good shepherd. No shepherd would leave his or her sheep out in the wilderness. No, Jesus is pointing to something very different, he's telling us about US, and about God. He's saying don't pretend to be religious leaders representing God when you reject those who are lost. That is not God's way. God always goes out after the lost. God is always searching for and reaching out to the lost, and when they return to the fold God celebrates. All of heaven rejoices when one sinner returns to the fold, when one person turns back to God.

Jesus challenges the scribes and Pharisees to celebrate all the people who pray to God, not just the ones who follow their rules. The Pharisees and scribes don't get that. They don't realize that God is primarily about love, rather than rules. God is about joy rather than anger or fear, or all the other things that it is easy to imagine God is about.

And Jesus challenges us today to celebrate everyone who is gathered here today, because the House of God is a place of joy! That's why Jesus told these parables about joy. He told them about a shepherd who lost one of his little sheep and was worried out of his mind. He went searching for it, and when at last he found it, he was overjoyed. God is like that shepherd, said Jesus.

He told them about a poor woman who had only 10 coins and one of them got lost, so she swept the house high and low till she found that coin, and she was so joyful about finding that coin, she threw a party to celebrate. God is like that poor woman, Jesus says.

He told them a story about a father whose younger son took half the family fortune, blew out of town and foolishly threw away all the money on high living and then came crawling home begging to have a place in his Father's home. The father was so overjoyed to see his son he never even thought about scolding him, but filled the house with music and feasting and dancing and laughter. God is like that Father, Jesus says.

Wherever God is, there is joy in the house, because the house of God is a place of joy, and that's because it is in God's house where people discover that what matters in life is not what they get, but the grace they are given.

It is in God's house, that people learn that what matters about them, is not how high they climb, but how deeply they are loved by God.

I read an essay recently in which a woman was reminiscing about her Father, She said that when she was young, she was very close to her Father. The time she experienced this closeness the most was when they would have big family gatherings with all the aunts and uncles and cousins. At some point, someone would pull out the old record player and put on polka records, and the family would dance. Eventually, someone would put on the "Beer Barrel Polka" and when the music of the Beer Barrel Polka played, her father would come up to her, tap her on the shoulder and say, "I believe this is our dance." And they would dance. One time though, when she was a teenager and she was in one of those teenage moods, and the Beer Barrel Polka began to play, when her father tapped her on the shoulder and said, I believe this is our dance, she snapped at him, "Don't touch me! Leave me alone!" And her father turned away and never asked her to dance again.

"Our relationship was difficult all through my teen years", She wrote. When I would come home late from a date, my Father would be sitting there in his chair, half asleep, wearing on old bathrobe, and I would snarl at him, "What do you think you're doing?" He would look at me with sad eyes and say, "I was just waiting for you." When I went away to college, the woman wrote, "I was glad to get out of the house and away from him and for years I never communicated with him, but as I grew older, I began to miss him.

One day I decided to go to the next family gathering, and when I was there, somebody put on "The Beer Barrel Polka". I drew a deep breath, walked over to my Father, tapped him on the shoulder and said, "I believe this is our dance." He turned to me and said, "I've been waiting on you."

Like the love of a Father, standing at the center of our life is the God who says, "Everything I have is yours. All that I am is for you, and I've been waiting on you." And when we return God celebrates, and all the company of heaven rejoices. Amen