

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 9/16/07
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Luke 15:1-10

Last Sunday afternoon, Larry and I were among the guests at a most amazing surprise birthday party. Our friend, Louise, had been through a hard couple of years. The previous September, she had thought about throwing a 50th birthday bash for herself, but with all the pain that she was experiencing in her personal life, she just didn't have the energy. That important milestone came and went without much acknowledgement.

So for her birthday this year, Louise's children and two of her closest women friends and their children planned a surprise party for her. These three families had become close friends soon after they had moved to their neighborhood in New Jersey years ago. The children rotated from one house to the next for meals, help with homework, and sleepovers. The moms – Louise, Cheryl, and Martha – took the kids to the beach together, to a dude ranch in the Catskills, and to the ski slopes. It really is one large, extended family.

Larry and I arrived at the appointed time with a gift and a pasta salad, adding to the already abundant offerings from the other guests. Cheryl's home, where the party was being held, looked beautiful. The tables were set; the carefully chosen music would add to the festivities. After Louise arrived, the guests would spill out of the house onto the wide, covered porch, and down to the lawn in front and the garden in back. It was clear that hours and hours of preparation had gone into making sure that Louise would feel celebrated and special and loved.

As we waited quietly in the darkened living room for the guest of honor to arrive, we heard the story of what had happened just the night before. The children of these three women had thrown yet another surprise party. Martha's birthday is in September as well, and the kids used the excuse of Martha's and Louise's birthdays to celebrate all three moms and to recognize the bond that their families had shared over the years. While Martha was out of the house on Saturday, the children – ranging in age from middle school to college – moved Martha's dining room table out into the back yard and set it with linen, crystal, china, and candles. They cooked and served a magnificent dinner. They sang "Happy Birthday" to Martha and Louise. And they presented an extraordinary memory book to each of the three moms that they had put together, with pictures taken during special times over the years, coupled with hysterical captions and commentary. There was an entire page devoted to Martha's ever-changing hairstyles over the years.

That surprise party the night before had been a true labor of love; a once-in-a-lifetime experience – except that for Louise, it was about to happen all over again, the very next day. Her friends and children had invited people who had been important to her throughout her adult life – from churches she'd been involved in, from work, from the band she sang with. After the party the night before, there would be no way that Louise would be expecting any further birthday celebration. She walked up the stairs to the front

porch of Cheryl's home, having been summoned, supposedly, for a minor medical issue, and people began to stream out of two different doors to greet her.

Louise was in complete and utter shock. Not only was the entire crew from the night before there again; she now faced dozens of new people she hadn't expected to find waiting for her at Cheryl's house. Every time she caught sight of someone else, she shrieked in disbelief. Her face became more and more pale. She started shaking. I heard someone behind me ask whether anyone was certified in CPR. Someone else said, "I think she needs a hug." As Louise was enfolded in the arms of her friends, she burst into tears, and sobbed, and sobbed, and sobbed.

I've described this scene of back-to-back surprise parties in such detail because I don't think I've ever experienced a more tangible expression of extravagant, abundant, absolutely over-the-top love. And that's just the type of love that Jesus attributes to God in today's Gospel passage. Luke writes that Jesus is being criticized by the religious authorities for sharing meals with people whose very presence was believed to defile everyone else at the table. These were the "lost" souls of that time and place – those considered to be, by their circumstances or their behavior, outside the realm of God's salvation. Jesus' response, according to Luke, is a series of three parables, two of which are in today's text.

A shepherd is so distraught over the loss of one of his sheep that he leaves the rest of the flock totally unattended in the wilderness to look for that one. When he finds it, he's so happy that he throws a party. A woman who has lost one coin spends the whole day searching every inch of her house until that coin is recovered, and then she calls her friends to rejoice with her. Jesus asks, in relation to each of these stories, "Who among you would do that?" The answer is that no one would. It's not practical; it's not efficient; it doesn't make sense. "That's exactly right," is the implied response from Jesus. "No one acts with such concern over a relatively insignificant loss – except for God, when dealing with God's people."

Each of us comes here today with our very own type and degree of "lostness." We might be lost in a packed schedule, so overwhelmed with our responsibilities that we haven't given a thought to God in days or weeks. We might be lost in addiction – to alcohol, food, gambling, shopping, or pornography. We might have become lost in our privileged position in the world, which has intensified our self-centeredness and blinded us to the needs of those around us. We might be lost in despair about our health, our finances, an important relationship. We might *think* we're lost amid doubts and questions about the doctrines of our religious tradition, which we mistakenly believe keeps us from relationship with God.

The good news is that God is in the business of seeking and finding the lost, and that there is nothing – absolutely nothing - that can separate us from God's relentless love. Like the shepherd with the lost sheep and the woman with the lost coin, God searches for us steadily and persistently, fueled by a passion that's lavish and excessive. And when

we allow ourselves to be found and embraced by God, the extravagance of God's celebration exceeds even that of Louise's double surprise birthday parties.

There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. May we turn, again, toward our loving God. May we allow God's healing and merciful love to transform our lives. May we join God's celebration of the lost being found. Amen.