

NOT IN THE CHURCH!

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Grace Church in New York
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Jesus said, *“Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.”* (Luke 15:6)

Some years ago my younger brother Jeff and his wife Cheryl were living in Germany. They are both scientists, and were there for a few years to do post-doctoral work in their respective fields. They strive to be practicing Christians, and during their time abroad they never gave up trying to participate in a meaningful worship experience on Sundays. It wasn't always easy.

My brother tells the story of what happened one particular Sunday when they ventured into an enormous cathedral in Nuremberg. They took their places in a pew about half way up the long nave. By this point they'd mastered enough German to follow along in the service, and since the structure of the Mass is essentially the same in any language, they thought they were doing quite well. The time came for the Passing of the Peace, and they watched all the other worshippers greet each other in the name of the Lord. Being husband and wife, Jeff and Cheryl exchanged an affectionate, yet not unseemly, kiss on the lips.

Suddenly, my brother felt a forceful blow to the back of his head. Shocked more than hurt, he spun around to see a little old lady in the pew behind him. She had struck him with the heel of her hand. Pow, right in the noggin! Apparently, she thought kissing in church was neither meet nor right to do. She glared at him and said, *“Nicht in die kirche! Das ist verboten!”* You can probably guess the translation: “Not in the church! That is forbidden!” You can probably also guess that the next Sunday my brother and his wife were searching someplace else for a meaningful worship experience.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, the Pharisees, the perpetual curmudgeons of the Gospels, are at it again. The Pharisees were a clerical order among the Jews who practiced for themselves, and did their best to enforce on others, a strict keeping of the Mosaic Law. They didn't have just Ten Commandments, they'd found in the Torah over 600. And to clarify the following of the 600+ commandments, they had added layer upon layer of new commandments. Their goal was to stay clean, so they had commandments about what they could eat and what they couldn't, whom they could touch and whom they couldn't, and on what day of the week they could or couldn't touch this or that possibly unclean person. *“Das ist verboten,”* is what they would say about every little thing. We can imagine how well they might have gotten along with the little old lady in Nuremberg. The Pharisees believed that failure to maintain the laws of ritual purity and the strict code of the Mosaic Law could lead to death, and eternal separation from God. Beware!

When Jesus came along he did everything wrong from the Pharisee's point of view. If Jesus really wanted to be a respected teacher of Israel – to say nothing about being the Messiah, as people suspected he might be – the Pharisees believed that Jesus should have stayed clean as they were clean. But instead, Jesus was spending his time with all the wrong people. The lepers, the widows, the poor, even his obtuse disciples were unclean. What is more, Jesus was known to dine with those who were unclean through their own fault: tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers, and swindlers. To these wayward souls the Pharisees would have little to offer in the way of redemption other than a stern glare of displeasure. Finding life difficult, are you? Can't manage to keep those Commandments? Let me scowl disapprovingly at you until you conform to the ways of the rest of us. So the Pharisees murmured and grumbled about the company Jesus kept, saying, *“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”*

Granted, the Pharisees get a bad rap from 21st century preachers. If they were trying too hard to follow God's commandments, well, at least they were trying. On many occasions Jesus sat down with the Pharisees and tried to redirect their zeal. In doing so, he would challenge them to consider that possibly they were missing the point. The point is not a petty and petulant God who is always on the verge of punishing the people. Instead, the point is God's desire to reach the lost, and God's joy when the lost are found. The point is God's joy. God, who is the source of being, wants to share the divine joy with all creation. So in parable after parable Jesus would challenge the Pharisees to rethink their conception of God's nature. Indeed, the better view into God's heart is not through the windows of law and logic and limits, but rather through the windows of love, and joy, and grace.

Jesus put it to the Pharisees like this: Imagine that you are a shepherd and you have a hundred sheep. Which one of you, upon losing one, will not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go and search for the one that is lost until you find it? And when you have found it, don't you lay it on your shoulders and come home rejoicing? The parable we heard today illustrates how God feels every time someone outside of the fold is brought inside. God rejoices because the flock is whole again. But did the Pharisees rejoice? Do we rejoice? I'm afraid the parable catches us too often not rejoicing with God, but grumbling with the Pharisees.

So it was, just a month ago, when I was embarking on my summer vacation. The first leg of the journey involved a drive to Wisconsin to visit family. When we stopped for the night I made the mistake of checking my phone and saw that I had an alarming number of new voicemails and emails. These all turned out to be in response to a Grace Church High School chapel service that had occurred back in April. In fact, it was the annual high school Pride Chapel that celebrates the wideness of God's mercy, and what ought to be the inclusive nature of God's community, especially as it pertains to the LGBTQ segment of the population. Apparently, the service included some prayers and testimonies from students and faculty. Then, because drag queens had played a crucial role in sparking the modern gay rights movement, a real live such performance artist who had been invited to the service came forward to speak about struggling with faith, and to sing "Somewhere over the rainbow."

Unfortunately, the drag queen was insufficiently attired. Everyone has a camera these days, so it was all caught on film and uploaded to social media. Finally, three months after it happened various news sources began picking up the story until it eventually landed in *The New York Post*. This brings us back to the emails and voicemails I was receiving. A few of the inquiries were from our own. They were mostly thoughtful, and I tried to answer every one of these. But the great majority of the senders were not members of the church or school community. They were from all over the country, claiming to be decent Christian people, yet using language and breathing threats that would pierce the heart of Jesus far more sharply than anything the drag queen did or said while under this roof. They were angry, arrogant, rude, and nosy. These messages I did not dignify with a reply.

Mind you, now, the Grace Church clergy were uninvolved in the planning of the chapel and not even present for it. I was not consulted about the appropriateness of the content. Had I been, you can be sure I would have said, "*Nicht in die kirche! Das ist verboten!*" I wouldn't have spoken German or used the heel of my hand to punctuate my point, but my affinity with the Pharisees and the little old lady would have been unmistakably clear. I would have suggested that a better venue might be an assembly in the high school gym, but not in the church. That is forbidden. Thus I reasoned with myself as we drove through Ohio and sat in Indiana traffic.

By the time we were crossing into Illinois I began reconsidering my ways. Perhaps lining up with the Pharisees would be to miss the point. The point of the parable we heard today is, first, the extraordinary lengths the shepherd will go to in order to find the one lost sheep. Second, it is about the shepherd's joy when the flock is made whole again. Look at it this way: no parent with three

children rejoice at the end of the day when only two are safely home. You can be sure that the one who is missing consumes the parent's thoughts. No one rejoices until everyone is home and the family is whole.

Let me be clear: the chapel service should not have happened in the way that it did. It won't happen again in the same manner. But it happened and nothing we can do will make it un-happen. Therefore I'm willing to side with the school, smile, and even laugh about it. "There goes the school, making the news again. What will it be next? An inclusive language guide? Oh, wait a minute, they've already done that." More to the point, I'm happy to look at what happened at the Pride Chapel through the lens of the parable of the lost sheep. It was done in the Spirit of Jesus on his rescue mission to make the flock whole, even to convey to the lost that no one should be left outside. Here was a person in church not normally numbered amongst the church-going public. Here was someone typically on the outside invited inside.

Was it a success? Probably not. In baseball terms it was a swing and a miss. You might even call it a spectacular miss. But striking out swinging is always better than going down with the bat on your shoulders. Some years ago I helped coach the 7th and 8th grade baseball team at Grace Church School. On game days I used to plead with the players to swing the bat. "You can't hit the ball if you don't swing the bat." The mission of the church – and yes, you can think of the school as an extension of the church – is to swing the proverbial bat. Plenty of times we go down looking for lack of trying, or out of fear. Sometimes we swing and miss. But sometimes we connect, and even knock the ball out of the park.

Today's reading from 1st Timothy (1:12-17) is actually the story of a time the church connected. It's the witness of someone on the outside brought miraculously inside. The person describes himself as a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence – not exactly someone you'd want as greeter in the narthex or speaking at a school chapel. But he writes that through the grace and patient rescue mission of Christ Jesus, God's mercy overflowed for him and he became a new person. Saul the persecutor became Paul the Apostle. At first the earliest Christians didn't believe it. They didn't want Paul coming anywhere near. Some struggled to forgive the things he'd done before the scales fell from his eyes: chasing down the Christians, arresting them, and presiding over the stoning of Stephen. But eventually they reconsidered their ways and welcomed Paul into the fold. As we heard in today's reading, his gratitude abounded.

A story out of Lourdes, France, that allegedly thin place in the veil between heaven and earth where miracles have been documented to occur, tells of a ten-year old boy who was blind from birth. The boy's father took him on a pilgrimage there and at the shrine prayed that his son would receive his sight. Suddenly, miraculously, the boy could see. The boy looked around at the multitudes, and then directly at his father. Upon gazing into the eyes that went with one of the few voices he had known, he said a curious thing: "Oh boy! Everybody's here!"¹

I believe the parable of the lost sheep speaks the same word as the little boy. God rejoices when "everybody's here." So what will be the statement that defines us? What will be the ethos of this community? "*Nicht in die kirche. Das ist verboten?*" Or, "Oh boy. Everybody's here?"

Given the choice, I would rather stand before the great judgement seat of Christ having erred on the side of the latter. I would rather go down swinging for God's joy, remembering the words of our Lord Jesus, who said, "*Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.*"

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¹ Brennan Manning, *Lion and Lamb*, Chosen Books, 1986, p. 140.