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Title: Good Enough: Worthy

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Text: [Luke 15:11-32](#)

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As new parents back in the late 90s, it seems like we were constantly reading to our boys. As any parent knows, some of the books become favorites and end up with tattered corners and broken bindings from being read again and again and again. At our house, one of those books was *Guess How Much I Love You?* written by Sam McBratney

and illustrated by Anita Jeram. Our copy has scotch tape holding the last page together. If you're not familiar with the story, here is the Cliff Notes version.

There are two rabbits – technically they're hares and not rabbits and there is a difference as I learned in my in-depth research for this sermon.¹ That's a topic for another day, or not. The two hares are named Big Nutbrown Hare and Little Nutbrown Hare – a parent and a child. Everybody with me so far? As Little Nutbrown Hare is going to bed he tells Big Nutbrown Hare how much he loves him. But Big Nutbrown Hare loves the child even more. Little Nutbrown Hare keeps trying to explain his love, but he finds that it can be hard to measure. He tries showing his love as high as he can reach, or as high as the tip of his toes as he stands upside down on his hands, as high as he can hop, and even as high as the moon. But, just as Little Nutbrown Hare is falling asleep, Big Nutbrown Hare whispers that he loves Little Nutbrown Hare to the moon - and back! It is a book filled with the joy that comes from deep, deep love.

One day, the Gospel of Luke tells us, Jesus had a conversation with some people who were having some problems in finding joy. These people were the Pharisees – the religious leaders of the day. We have learned to think of them as the bad guys, the villains, but that may be too hard on them. The Pharisees were loyal in worship and people of prayer. They were generous people, good people, who knew they had a responsibility to give their money to the poor and to feed the hungry. They honored the scripture and studied it. But as the Gospel of Luke portrays it, they had a problem with joy. They especially had a problem with the kind of joy that Jesus seemed to radiate,

joyfully eating and drinking with sinners and being around prostitutes and tax collectors.

So, Jesus told them some stories, some parables about joy. Just like last week, there are three stories in this section. They are all about the pain of being lost and the joy in being found. Our lectionary reading for today, the assigned reading for the fourth Sunday in Lent, actually starts with an introduction at the start of chapter 15 that I didn't have our worship leader read because the story was already long enough. It says, "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable:" (Luke 15 1-3). No joy. Did you hear the word it used - "grumbling" it says? The Pharisees were the church curmudgeons!

After those three introductory verses, the lectionary skips two parables before it gets to our story for today. These two skipped parables are stories about things that are lost and the joy in finding them. Jesus told them about a shepherd who lost one of his sheep and, worried out of his mind, he went searching for it. When at last he found it, he was overjoyed. Jesus said God is like that shepherd searching everywhere to find what is lost and experiencing great joy when the sheep is found.

Then, 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 until she found that coin, and she was so joyful about finding that coin, she threw a party to celebrate. Jesus said God is like that poor woman searching everywhere to find what is lost and experiencing great joy when the coin is found.

Then, he told them a third story. 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 his old room back. The father was so overjoyed to see his son, that he never even thought about scolding him but filled the house with music and feasting and dancing and laughter. Jesus said God is like that father that experiences great joy when the lost is found.

The sheep is a precious resource for which the shepherd would be responsible to the owner if it should be found missing. The coin is part of the limited personal wealth of the poor woman who is keeping her own house or working for another. Such dowry coins were the only insurance should the woman find herself without her husband by either death or divorce.²

The contagious joy expressed in exactly parallel terms when the lost items are found makes clear their value. In the same extravagant way, Jesus wants the religious leaders to understand, that God rejoices when someone who was lost is welcomed back into the community.

Wherever God is, there is joy in the house. The house of God is a place of joy because it is there that people discover that what matters in life is not what they get but the grace they are given. It is there that people learn that what matters about them is not how high they climb, but how deeply they are loved by God. Isn't it strange that so many of us who are committed Christians stay outside the house of joy? We're like the older brother in Jesus' third story. "What's that noise?" he said. "It's a party," replied the servant, "a joyful party. Your brother is home!" "A party for my brother? My brother who threw away my father's money? Foolish! A party for my brother who frittered away his life while I tried to make something of myself?"

But something different and strange happens in this story. The father comes outside the house, outside the party, outside the joy and merriment, out to the older brother, out to the Pharisee, out to all of us. "What's wrong?" he said. "I've served you all my life. I've never disobeyed you." And then comes the touching part. "You never gave a party for me. I've always wanted to be joyful, but you never gave a party for me."

And then comes the gracious and loving reply. "Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'" (Luke 15:31-32) Essentially, the father says that there has always been a joyful party going on for you in my heart and you did not know it. Now, come, come into the house, come into the house of joy.

I think that part of what this is saying to us is that we will never really experience the joy of our faith until we realize that we are all outsiders who have been invited into the party of joy through no merit of our own. Some of us are like the younger brother, people who have wasted our lives. Some of us are like the older brother, people who have worked hard and who smolder with resentment because things are hard and responsibilities are heavy, and life is not fair. But the fact is, both are on the outside, both the younger son and the older son are on the outside, and it is God who invites us inside – inside to the place of joy.

In his memoir from 2010 titled *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts*, Neil White recounts his eighteen-month federal prison sentence for bank fraud. He was not sent to any ordinary prison, but to Gillis W. Long Hansen's Disease

Center in Carville, Louisiana. Hansen's Disease is another name for leprosy. Hansen's Disease, or leprosy, was once a life sentence of forced isolation. Thankfully, it is now curable, due in part to the treatments developed at Carville throughout the 20th century. Throughout the latter part of the 20th century, Carville continued to care for patients, though it would see fewer and fewer admitted. From the late 1980s through the early 1990s, Carville also was used by the Bureau of Prisons to house non-violent offenders. ³

Neil White and other prison inmates - many of them convicted of similar white-collar crimes - shared building space with the last people in America that had leprosy. In the early days of his stay, White does everything possible to avoid being near the leprosy outcasts. He keeps his distance, even holding his breath if they come close to him. Over time though, he befriends many of them and comes to admire their tenacity as they cope with the cruelty of their condition and the indifference of the world that has forgotten them.

One evening, the Hansen's Disease patients were holding their annual spring dance. Neil and another white-collar inmate were assigned to set up tables and chairs and unload the sound equipment in the patient ballroom. The DJ begins pumping music out of the speakers before Neil and his partner can exit. Patients wheel and slide their walkers onto the dance floor. Bandaged hands are lifted, wheelchairs are shimmying, and disfigured faces are beaming. An elderly woman motions for Neil and offers her hand. In a moment of joyful connection, Neil receives her hand which, despite dead nerves, feels soft and smooth. Suddenly two more prison inmates sneak into the party and dance among the patients. The first song ends, and the patients clap as best they can.

Suddenly, a loud shout brings the celebration to a screeching halt. From his wheelchair, a leper named Smeltzer declares, "You're not invited! No inmates at our party!" The room falls silent, smiles disappear, and the moment of joy passes. "You're not welcome here," the Pharisee, ah err, Smeltzer yells, "Go on. Get." Quietly the four inmates make their way to the exit door. As they pass through the door, another inmate looks at Neil and breaks the silence. "Good God. Did we just get kicked out of a party for outcasts?" Neil and his colleagues had become outcast on top of outcast.⁴

The good news is that in Christ's ballroom there is space for everyone - even for the clean, healthy, antiseptic, righteous non-lepers of the world. There is a place at the table for the joy lacking, dullest of Pharisees, and the dirtiest of sinners. There is room for the most aimless of sheep and the most hidden of coins.

The good news is that God's talent for finding us is greater than our talent for getting lost. There is always joy in the love that God has for us.

An alternate ending to the popular children's book might read like this. We might say that we love God right up to the moon. But God would say, "Oh, that's far, that is very, very far." But as God leans over and kisses us and whispers with a smile, "I love you right up to the moon – and back."

God's joy in loving us is hard to measure and always more than we can imagine. And always, always, there is rejoicing when we are in the presence of God.

¹ While it's likely I'll never come back to the difference between rabbits and hares, an in-depth analysis can be found on the National Geographic site. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/141219-rabbits-hares-animals-science-mating-courtship>

² Commentary help for this sermon from Commentary on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 by Sharon H. Ringe, March 6, 2016 found at www.workingpreacher.org.

³ Information about the Gillis W. Long Hansen's Disease Center in Carville, Louisiana found at: <https://prcno.org/revisiting-louisianas-medical-legacy-national-leprosarium-carville/>

⁴ <https://www.amazon.com/Sanctuary-Outcasts-Memoir-P-S/dp/0061351636>