

“The Grateful Samaritan”

Luke 17:11-19

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

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Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

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Today is the day that we ordain and install a new class of elders here at Westminster. In a little while, those elders will make a series of promises, answering the questions for ordination. Twelve questions total, and one of them goes like this:

“Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?”

It’s my favorite ordination vow.

But I think it leaves something out.

If I were writing the question, I would add one more word to that vow...and that word is “joy.”

Will you...seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, love, and joy?

Why joy?

Not just because I believe it’s essential for our elders.

But also because I believe it’s essential for the Christian faith.

We are continuing our sermon series on the Gospel of Luke, and joy runs like a ribbon throughout Luke’s Gospel. Not that the other Gospel writers fail to mention joy, but Luke makes a particular point of weaving it into so many of his stories.

Do you remember the Christmas story, at the beginning of his Gospel?

The angel says to the shepherds:

“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people...”

Do you remember the end of Luke’s Gospel?  
When Jesus has been raised, and ascends into heaven, Luke writes:

“And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy...”

Luke begins with joy.  
He ends with joy.  
And along the way, he loved to tell stories about joy.

You heard two of them in our first text for today:  
Lost sheep. Lost coin.

What does the shepherd say when he finds his sheep?  
“Rejoice with me...”

What does the woman say when she finds the coin?  
“Rejoice with me...”

It’s in our second text for today as well, this picture of joy...

It’s the story of a Samaritan—  
not the parable of the Good Samaritan,  
but the story of the Grateful Samaritan,  
the one with leprosy,  
the one who returned to Jesus,  
praising God for healing him,  
after he had been made clean...

Imagine, for just a moment, what this person’s life was like.

Perhaps many years earlier, his life was good, with a wife and 3 beautiful children and a job that paid well...that was before the disease.

But then he develops this disease, this devastating disease, and it's on his skin for everyone to see, and the priest tells him he's UNCLEAN, and society tells him he's UNCLEAN, and his friends are no longer his friends because he's UNCLEAN. And he has to go live in this colony of other people with the same disease...on the outskirts of society, shunned by society, and he too has lost something.

He has lost FOREVER the life that he once had.

Or so he thinks.

And then there's the day that Jesus comes walking through.

This Samaritan, he's heard about Jesus, he knows the reports...

So he shouts out with all the others:

"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

And Jesus does not walk by them like everyone else.

Jesus looks at them.

And Jesus says to them:

"Go and show yourselves to the priests."

And the text says: "...as they went, they were made clean."

I want you to picture that moment. The moment that this Samaritan, this outcast, this child of God who thought the life that he once knew was gone for good...I want you to picture the moment he realized...I just got my life back.

Can you see the wonder?

Can you see the joy?

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I believe that joy is the starting point of faith.  
 I believe it's the deepest reason that we're here.  
 Not just our joy, but God's joy at bringing us here...

Let me get at it like this.

How many of you have ever been frustrated on a Sunday morning when you couldn't find a good parking space at Westminster? Anyone?

And how many of you have had the experience of pulling into Westminster on a Sunday, and you DID find a good parking spot—hopefully that happens more often with our wonderful new parking lot—and it made you happy?

It's perfectly fine for you to be happy when you come across a good parking place at Westminster on a Sunday morning.

But happiness...is not the same as joy.  
 Happiness, good parking—not the reason that you're here.

Not too long ago, the columnist David Brooks wrote publicly about his faith:

“When faith finally tiptoed into my life  
 it didn't come through information or persuasion but,  
 at least at first, through numinous experiences.

“It hit me,” he said, “with the force of joy.”

Faith, says Brooks, “is more like falling in love than it is like finding the answer to a complicated question.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Brooks, “The Shock of Faith,” *The New York Times*, December 19, 2024, [Opinion | The Shock of Faith: It's Nothing Like I Thought It Would Be - The New York Times](#).

“When you’ve fallen in love with a person...it’s not because you calculated your way there; it’s because some flame was ignited by a force greater [than you]...more passionate than your reasoning mind; it irradiates you, conquers you...” It SEIZES you!<sup>2</sup>

May I suggest that’s why all of us are here?

Because we’ve been seized by the love of God,  
 entranced and enchanted by the wonders of God,  
 know a deeper joy than we can adequately express  
 for the healing and holy hand of God...

And when you know that kind of joy, what are you going to do with it?

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I’m reminded of a story about the actor Chad Everett.  
 Do you remember Chad Everett?  
 Among other roles, he played Dr. Joe Gannon on the television series *Medical Center* in the 1970’s.

That’s even before my day!

But this is not just a story about Chad Everett.  
 It’s also a story about an actor named Ronnie Simonsen.  
 Ronnie Simonsen...was not as well known.

At the time of this story, Ronnie was a middle-aged man with an outstanding memory.

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<sup>2</sup> David Brooks, “A Surprising Route to the Best Life Possible,” *The New York Times*, March 27, 2025 [Opinion | How to Have a Passionate Life - The New York Times](#).

He had some physical and emotional limitations, but even with his limitations, Ronnie had a certain talent when he was in front of a camera.

He knew how to perform, how to get other people to open up.

And he was always wanting to meet people who spent their careers in front of a camera, or people he recognized from television:

Like Walter Cronkite. Jackie Onasis.

And Ronnie's biggest dream was to meet the actor Chad Everett.

Why Chad Everett?

Who knows?

But Ronnie was absolutely obsessed with meeting Chad Everett.

So one day, the filmmaker Arthur Bradford decided to help Ronnie make his dream come true. They went out to California, hoping to meet Chad Everett. After spending a few days in L.A., they learn the street that Chad Everett lives on.

Ronnie says, "I just wanna see what his house looks like."

So they go to Mr. Everett's gated community, and they sneak past the guard, and they get to what they believe is Mr. Everett's house.

And they're hiding in the bushes, outside this house.

Waiting there...for 10 minutes, for 20 minutes, for 45 minutes.

When they've been there in the bushes for over an hour, Arthur Bradford finally realizes what a TERRIBLE idea this is. Because if Chad Everett walked out of the house, Ronnie was going to rush toward him, and someone was going to call the police, and it was all going to end very badly.

Long story short, they leave the bushes.  
They don't meet Chad Everett.

The closest Ronnie gets to Chad Everett is kissing Chad Everett's star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

But Arthur Bradford was getting all this on film, and he still had the footage from their trip.

So he decides to make the film.  
And wouldn't you know it, months later Mr. Bradford gets a phone call.

A deep voice at the other end of the line says, "Hello, this is Chad Everett."

Bradford says, "No, it's not."  
"Yes," said the voice, "it is."

It was Chad Everett, he had seen Bradford's film, and he liked it.  
He liked it a lot.

And Chad Everett agreed that if Bradford could get Ronnie out to California again, he would meet Ronnie. And he would do an interview with him.

So Arthur Bradford and Ronnie Simonsen get on a plane, and they fly out to California...they arrange to meet Mr. Everett on this beach. Ronnie's at the beach, and in the distance, a convertible pulls up, and the license plate says SIR CHAD.

A handsome older man steps out, and he starts walking across the beach. He's a hundred yards away, and Ronnie spots him.

Ronnie yells, “Is that Chad Everett?”  
 And Chad Everett yells back, “Yes it is! You better believe it!”

And Ronnie runs across the beach, yelling, “Chad Everett! Chad Everett!”

And he reaches him and throws his arms around him and says:  
 “Chad, I’m so happy to see you!”<sup>3</sup>

It’s a scene of unbridled joy!

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Why am I sharing this with you?

Because ever since I watched that scene—you can find it, Google it if you like, after worship—ever since I saw it, I had this picture in my mind of Jesus doing the same thing.

This picture of Jesus...running toward you.  
 Did you know he does it every Sunday that you’re here?

Jesus would not make a good Presbyterian, he doesn’t always do things decently and in order...when he sees you here, he doesn’t just say hello. He RUNS...he runs down the center aisle to welcome you, out to the Green Lot to say he’s overjoyed to see you.

And he never leaves you.

When you get up and leave for work in the morning, Jesus is there, down the street, running toward you, he’s going to ride with you to work and be with you at work.

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<sup>3</sup> This story is told by Arthur Bradford on the Moth podcast as “The Quest for Chad,” found at <https://themoth.org/stories/the-quest-for-chad>. Another source of information was the obituary that appeared in *The Boston Globe* for Ronnie Simonsen, December 24, 2010.



And when you are going through a difficult time, Jesus will be there too. He'll run and run and he'll find you, and he'll hold you close to his heart...

He's so glad to see you.  
Whether you feel good or sad or even lost...

Do you know what it's like to be lost?

We all do.  
At different times in our lives, we all do.

Maybe you're like the sheep—you were lost because you got distracted, wandered off, don't even know how you did it.

Maybe you're like the Samaritan.  
It's not your fault.  
It just happened to you.  
And it's not what God wants for you.

If you have ever been lost, or maybe feel lost today, I want you to get in your mind the RUNNING...not Ronnie running.

It's Jesus.  
And he's heading straight for you.  
Do you know what he's going to do with you?

A number of months after he met Chad Everett, Arthur Bradford got a call from Ronnie.

Ronnie had some bad news—he had been diagnosed with cancer. He wasn't expected to live more than six more months.

So Ronnie said to Arthur Bradford, “Look, I know that Chad Everett’s a really busy man. But do you think you could tell him about this?”

“Sure, Ron. I can let him know.”

So Arthur Bradford informs Chad Everett about Ronnie.

And then...something else happened.

Chad Everett started calling Ronnie every Sunday, and they would talk. Without fail, he called Ronnie every single Sunday so they could have a conversation. And Ronnie outlived his diagnosis by months and months. He lived for two more years.

In fact, before Ronnie died, he went back to California a third time and had a party with Chad Everett to celebrate their friendship.<sup>4</sup>

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Now why did Chad Everett do that?

You know why he did it.

He did it because it was a joy for the risen Jesus to be at work through him. It’s the same reason that you do what you do, when you leave this place every Sunday, going out into God’s world in peace, with courage, holding on to what is good, returning no one evil for evil, strengthening the faint hearted, supporting the weak, helping the suffering, honoring all persons...

Because it is a joy for Jesus to do his work...through you...

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.