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**REASONS TO REJOICE**

I'd like to begin by sharing with you Bill's testimony:

*I was born into a home of near constant rage and violence. My mother never married my father or my brother's father. As a result of my mother's constant angry outbursts, she could not hold down a job and she, my brother, and I lived with her parents and my unmarried uncle in a small row house in Baltimore, Maryland.*

*My grandfather never filed an income tax return and most of what he did do during his life was illegal or ill-advised. He had no savings. My grandmother read Tarot cards and sent out demons by burning human hair. My uncle kept hordes of pornography in his room and my mother filled the house with statues of mating animals which she worshiped.*

*I was taught that, because there was no GOD, there was no such thing as right or wrong. She taught me that the most important things in life were physical pleasures of drink, food, and sex.*

*For many years I lived the life I was taught. I drank a quart of vodka a day and by the time I was thirty I had been married twice. I lived only to eat, drink, and have what I thought were sexual pleasures.*

*At age thirty, I began to realize how empty my life had been. There were no people in my life. My only friends were cigarettes and booze. It was that realization that led me on my search for GOD. I had seen every evil in the world and now wanted to see the other side of life.*

*I turned to a Twelve-Step program to stop the drinking and there found my first awareness of a loving GOD. Yet that GOD had no name.*

*In a novel, I read the story of the great physician, Luke, and I yearned to have the relationship and love of GOD this man had, but I did not know how to reach GOD. On January 25, 1980, as I slept in my apartment in San Francisco, the HOLY SPIRIT came upon me and directed me to seek the truth in the Holy Bible. This was the one place I had never looked for the nature of GOD, for it was this very book that my mother had removed from our nation's schools by her lawsuit in 1963.*

*Now awakened by the call of GOD, I drove to a downtown discount department store and there found a Bible under stacks of pornography. The checkout clerk laughed at me for buying a Bible.*

*But it was in this Bible that I found the truth about JESUS CHRIST. The truth that sets every man free. That truth is that JESUS*

*had paid the price for my sin so I could be reborn and be a new man and have the gift of eternal life. I learned that this gift was mine for the asking. All I had to do was repent of my sins and ask CHRIST into my life as LORD!*

*My life began again when I accepted CHRIST into my life.*

That was the testimony of William J. Murray, the son of Madalyn Murray O'Hare who founded American Atheists and who successfully challenged mandatory prayer and Bible reading in schools.

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JESUS said, "There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

- To illustrate HIS point, JESUS told the parables from today's gospel.
- And what HE wants us to understand is that, as Christians, we have many reasons to rejoice and, using the first of today's parables, I'd like to talk about three.

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First, we can rejoice in getting found.

- *“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?”*
- JESUS isn’t really asking, though.
- JESUS is telling—telling what GOD is like;
  - telling us that GOD hates to lose even one soul.

Now, maybe you’ve never been lost.

- Maybe you’ve always been a believer.
  - But have you ever strayed?
  - Ever gone your own way and departed from GOD’S way for a time?
    - Yet, here you are; back here in the fold.
- If you take a look into your past, you might even see that it was the hand of GOD that found you and brought you home.
  - And that’s a reason to rejoice!

Or, perhaps you started out in a different place.

- Perhaps you began life without a SHEPHERD who cared about you.
  - But you didn’t know that you were part of a flock, did you?
  - And you didn’t know that someone was looking for you, did you?
    - And now you’re here.
    - Now you’ve been found.
      - And that’s a reason to rejoice!

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A second reason we can rejoice is for getting carried.

- *“When he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home.”*
- That’s a wonderful image—the shepherd carrying the sheep on his shoulders.
  - But did you ever think to ask why he carries it rather than just shooing it along or leading it home?

Well, let me tell you why.

- The first thing a shepherd does when he finds his sheep who is constantly getting lost is to break its leg.
  - That’s right. It may sound cruel, but the shepherd breaks the leg of the sheep and then, since it now can’t walk, carries it.
- Think about this, though,
  - After weeks of being carried by the shepherd while the leg is mending, depending on the shepherd for everything, a bond is formed—
    - a bond that is so strong that the sheep will never stray again.

Have you ever been broken, wounded, damaged, needing someone to carry you?

- Did you ever question why GOD would let that happen to you?
  - If you think about it, though, you may find that it was in the midst of that brokenness that you were brought closer to GOD.

In II Corinthians 12:9, we hear the LORD’S words to Paul: *“MY grace is sufficient for you, for MY power is made perfect in weakness.”*

- Isn’t it when we are at our weakest that we find the strength that GOD offers?
  - It is by grace that GOD comes looking for us, and it is in our weakness that we discover GOD strength.
    - And that, too, is a reason to rejoice!

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A third reason that JESUS gives us to rejoice has to do with getting together.

- *“Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’”*

There should be celebration whenever the lost are found.

- There should be rejoicing whenever a stray comes home.

JESUS calls us to be together as one body, one family who works together to accomplish what GOD needs us to do.

- JESUS invites us to come together to rejoice—to celebrate—to have a feast when even only one returns.
    - And celebrations like that can also be a way of inviting other to come into the fold.
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So, let me suggest three lessons to take with us:

- ❶ For the sake of one, GOD will leave the ninety-nine.

It doesn't make sense to risk so many others for just one, but GOD does.

- Everyone is precious to GOD and GOD will chase after every single one if it means they might decide to return.

And if it's such a high priority for GOD, it must also be for us.

- We also must be looking around us to see if there is someone who needs help finding their way back,
    - or who needs to be picked up and carried back.
      - It's a good thing to be giving out invitation cards, and we should.
      - But far better to give it to someone and say, “I go to church at 9:30. I'll pick you up at 9:00.”
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- ❷ All sheep are welcome in the flock.

William J. Murray did not lead the life of a model Christian.

- Yet he found his way into the church and became a powerful witness to the love of GOD.
- Saul was the biggest Christian-killer of the time of the early Christian Church.
- But JESSUS chose him and changed his name to Paul, and he became, perhaps, the greatest Christian-maker of his day.

Notice, though, that we don't get to choose which sheep come in.

- That choice belongs to the SHEPHERD.
  - We are simply invited to rejoice.
    - The SHEPHERD knows why the flock needs these sheep.
      - And the SHEPHERD rejoices that they have come.
      - We are invited by the SHEPHERD to also rejoice.
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- ❸ GOD likes to party.

I doubt that we think about GOD that way.

- But these two parables, and the one that follows—the Prodigal Son—all end with parties—big parties, with everyone invited.
  - GOD likes to get together with GOD'S children and blow the roof off.
  - (Maybe that's why so many churches were built with such high ceilings.)
- It's a good thing for us to be looking for ways to celebrate what God is doing.
- It's a good thing for us to be recognizing and reveling in even the smallest accomplishments of the kingdom (even when one is found from among one hundred).
  - And it's a good thing when we can rejoice in even the smallest gain for the kingdom and have celebration!

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Each person that comes is invited by the LORD, just as each of us was.

- Whether it was when you were a baby or as an adult;
- whether you never left, or found your way back, or were carried back by the SHEPHERD,
  - all of heaven rejoices that you were found.
  - That means that every one of you has given heaven reason to rejoice,
    - and heaven invites you to join in the rejoicing at the finding of others.

Others will be found.

- Other will be carried home by the SHEPHERD.
  - And that is a joyous thing each time it happens.
- Praise GOD that heaven and the church rejoice that we came.
- Praise GOD that heaven rejoices when another comes.
  - And let us see each person that comes and joins us,
    - each person that the SHEPHERD brings,
    - every lost soul who repents and joins the flock is indeed another reason to rejoice!