I don’t enjoy hearing things I have heard before. I don’t enjoy being told things I already know, or sitting through an explanation that isn’t necessary because the point was self-evident from the start. That stubbornness can get me into trouble, because I am a Christian, and Christians are committed to gathering week after week to read and to study the same, unchanging book. The same words of Jesus recorded in these same four gospels are all we’ve got. If you are a Christian, you are guaranteed to hear some things over and over again.

This is especially the case when it comes to the parables of Jesus: these vivid stories that illustrate the compelling and central messages of the gospel. They are short, they are memorable, and the cut to the point. The parables of the lost sheep and of the lost coin are followed immediately by the parable of the prodigal son, and together they pull back the veil on the way God’s love is invading this world.

So if you know these stories, then you surely know the sermon that goes along with them: the Main Point that we are to extract and carry with us in our daily lives. It’s a good sermon, true and faithful in every way, and it goes something like this: Jesus ate with sinners and with tax collectors. He repeatedly surrounded himself with outcasts and marginalized people, and this earned him the scorn of people at the center of society: the rich, the powerful, and the pious religious authorities. So, while the formal religious structures were appalled at his company, Jesus was busy building a real “church” of those whom God relentlessly seeks after. Jesus’ church was a church of the poor, and unfortunately, it is not very similar to our church today. We church folks today, if we’re being honest, might find ourselves being appalled that certain others were drawing near to Jesus; we might find that those we would condemn are being welcomed with joy by their savior; we might find that we are a little bit like the Scribes and the Pharisees. The ones we are most concerned with are the pious people who are in the church, but the ones Jesus is really after are still out there, on the margins of our church life and our community life.

It’s a very good sermon. In fact, that argument, that way of reading these parables, is really the basis for a very Methodist idea that we call “free grace”. John Wesley looked to parables like these for evidence that salvation in Christ Jesus was God’s gift offered to all of us, not just a predestined group of elect souls. God will pursue the one who is lost because “It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost” (Mt. 18:14). This is a scriptural affirmation that God’s love and saving grace are available to anyone who has faith.

That’s a good sermon. But you may find, when you hear it, that it leaves you wanting something more. Because Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees seems to be something along the lines of, “The doctor is seeing other patients now, so please wait your turn and don’t complain.” The parables Jesus tells are obviously good news for the poor, and for the outcast, for the tax collector and the sinner and the one who is lost. But it also sounds like bad news for the Pharisees and Scribes, and they are people too. Not only that, but they are people who seem like the kind of people we sometimes can be. What about them? What about us?

It is too easy to sidestep the question by standing up and declaring ourselves to be the sinners who have been found. Of course that is the story for all of us: of course we are all sinners, we all stand in need of continual repentance, and we all are being saved by the grace of God. But while we believe growth in faith is a lifelong journey, we also believe that conversion, justification, is a one-time thing. And if you’re someone who has been in the church for a while, or if it has been all your life, then that moment was probably some time in the past. We’re not accustomed to speaking of ourselves, or anybody as a “righteous person who needs no repentance,” but Jesus uses that exact phrase in verse 7. We may not describe ourselves that way, but following Jesus’ metaphor, we can at least admit that, for the most part, the people who come into church on Sunday morning are more like the 99 sheep who are not lost than like the one who is.

And it’s not all bad to read Scripture from the perspective of a Pharisee. It is important to recognize that Pharisees actually get a pretty bad wrap. They appear throughout the gospels as the opponents of Jesus and his sinful cohort, but the Pharisees were also an important part of Jewish life and religious renewal in that time. Today, if you look up “pharisaical” in the dictionary, you will learn that it means to be hypocritically self-righteous. It’s true that the Pharisees we encounter in the gospels are more concerned with strict observance of the law than with listening to the voice of the God who gave the law. We saw that a few weeks ago, with the story of those who criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. But if you look at their roots, at their priorities, they may not be all that different from the Methodists.

Methodists began as a renewal movement within the Church of England, a movement meant to ignite people to repent and to live obedient lives; Methodism was a movement that empowered laypeople; Methodism’s watchword was...
“Scriptural holiness.” Well guess what, folks: the Pharisees were the “Scriptural Holiness” people of first-century Judaism. They were a renewal movement existing outside the formal leadership of the Temple. They were committed to the Scriptures, and they were committed to holy living, and they weren’t about to compromise on either one. And who could fault them, really? These were pious people, who wanted their nation to be pleasing in God’s sight.

So I find myself left with lingering and unanswered questions, because I have a hard time seeing what good it does to preach this sermon to the 99 sheep in the flock, or to the Pharisees and scribes. What’s the point of walking into church and announcing that God’s great joy is in chasing people who wouldn’t go to church? If the Methodists are right – if God truly desires the salvation of all people, and if the good news of Jesus Christ is good news for everyone – then what is the good news for Pharisees?

Part of the answer is to say that the flock is better when it is together than when it is scattered. In other words, there are benefits that come to us all when one who was lost is returned.

Last week I was speaking with a ministry colleague from the Western North Carolina conference. He told me about how, at his church, after years of mounting frustration over why their neighbors wouldn’t come to church, a few of them had decided to start a Bible study in a nearby trailer park. They made a connection with one person who lived there. They put out the invitation to a few more to join for Bible study. He said, “Our hosts made up the living room as best as they could. And here, on the couch, there was a woman who, through her admittedly bad choices, had probably never worked a day in her life. And next to her is a church member who is president of a construction company. Next to him is a guy who works as a police officer and a prison guard. Next to him is a man who served twenty-seven years, for a murder. It was amazing, and it was so uncomfortable, and God was there.”

If you sit in church week after week, you may find that you feel safe and insulated by the steady flock, but perhaps distant from Jesus himself, and wondering what to do about it. The old sermon wasn’t wrong, but it left us without any good direction. The emphasis of the old sermon fell on the sharp edge of this parable: the command to go seek the lost, and to have love and compassion rather than scorn for those who do not know the love of God. But note that Jesus doesn’t tell these parables with condemnation or warning. He doesn’t say, “Woe unto you, who would ignore the lost sheep and stay with the herd. Those who do not seek after lost coins shall be cast into the outer darkness.” The point is not to fill the Pharisees and the Scribes with fear, but to invite them into joy.

That’s where the emphasis falls in these parables: not just on the act, the seeking and finding, but on the joy, the joy that is unbridled and must be shared. The shepherd comes home, calls his friends and neighbors, saying to them “Let’s celebrate!” The woman who finds her lost coin does the exact same thing. Jesus uses the exact same words: she calls her friends and neighbors. “Let’s celebrate!” And Jesus tells us that the celebration doesn’t stop there. The joy that is being shared among the finders and their friends extends all the way to highest heaven.

We remember the words of Romans 12, where we are told to “rejoice with those who rejoice”. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin are invitations to participate in the seeking and finding, but they are also invitations to join in the great heavenly “Hallelujah” over the work that God in Christ is doing among God’s children. The good news for the Pharisees, and for the ninety-nine sheep who remained with the flock, and for the faithful churchgoing Methodists, is that Jesus isn’t satisfied with what he’s got. He may have already found you and found me, and he may still have work to do on you and on me, but he’s not satisfied and he is not stopping there. The good news for us is that God in Christ continues to go out, to seek relentlessly after men and women, and to call back to us, his voice brimming with joy: “Come, and see! I have reclaimed what is mine. I have found what was lost. I am reconciling all things in heaven and on earth.” If you want to be faithful to God, then rejoice when God rejoices.