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What's Found After Loss
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Tears and fears and feeling proud, to say I love you right out loud, dreams and schemes and circus crowds, I've looked at life that way. But now old friends are acting strange, they shake their heads, and they tell me that I've changed. Well, something's lost but somethings gained in living every day.

Even if you are unfamiliar with the songs of singer songwriter Joni Mitchell, perhaps you recognize the lyrics of one of her best loved songs that was featured in the movie that was last year's *Academy Award Winner* for Best picture, *Coda*. While the performance of the song *Both Sides Now* was moving in the movie, Joni Mitchell herself brought something even more profound to the song a few months ago when she sang it at a concert no one expected her to give.

Joni Mitchell has had a long career. *Both Sides Now* was written in 1967, when she was in her early 20's and it became a hit. Possibly because the lyrics are a wise reflection of how life has its painful side that can inhibit delight and happiness. The song is also about how when both sides of life can be held together, both what is lost and what is found can give us something better than innocent certainty, they give us joy.

In 2015, Joni Mitchell suffered a brain aneurysm. While she survived, the brain aneurysm left her unable to do most of the things you and I take for granted: walking, talking, sitting down in a chair. Through daily physical therapy, Joni slowly healed. Not over a period of days, but over the last 6 years. She learned how to play guitar again by watching videos of her younger self. She had to relearn the songs she wrote. This summer, singer and songwriter Brandi Carlyle gave a concert with Joni Mitchell where she and several other famous singers provided back up for Joni. It was a beautiful concert. Joni can no longer stand for long periods of time, and in a strong show of love and respect everyone on stage was seated, like she was. Her voice has changed significantly, it is much deeper, but no less beautiful. When she faltered on a lyric, either because of emotion or forgetfulness, Brandi quietly, subtly provided it and then let Joni sing.

Of all the songs she sang at that concert, it was *Both Sides Now* that moved people to tears. You can watch a video of it on You Tube. Perhaps because 78-year-old Joni deeply embodied the song she wrote so long ago with a wisdom that is more than philosophical: it was spiritual and physical. Joni Mitchell isn't just an elder

who has healed, she is showing us as individuals and as a country how we can heal after a tragedy. She shows us moving forward well means not forgetting or ignoring the past. We move forward well when we hold both sides, the good and the bad, the pain and the hope, the past and the present, what has been lost, and what has been found together. That is how we heal and grow into the joy of God's Kingdom.

This is the same wisdom of Jesus' parables we heard in today's Gospel where Jesus responded to the criticism of religious leaders with two stories about the rejoicing that happens when someone found what was lost. In both parables, the seeker never gave up, even if it was difficult or dark, if they were tired, even if they didn't know where to look. It could be said the joy in the finding resulted because of how challenging the seeking was. In both parables, the joy of the person who found what was lost was so great they couldn't keep it for themselves, they had to share it by inviting others to join them, illustrating joy is what can both draw us and hold us together.

A common interpretation of these parables is to associate the lost sheep or coin with people who have left the church. But I wonder if that is a mistake, because Jesus didn't tell these parables in the context of church communities. He told them in response to criticism he was hanging out with the wrong kind of people; quite possibly as an attempt to discredit him. This wasn't about worship; this was about who Jesus ate dinner with. This can lead us to assume that Jesus supported the tax collectors and sinners, but I don't think that was the case either. Jesus loved them, but the joy of heaven, according to the Gospel, comes from the change of heart that leads to the kind of life God wants for us. That's what it means to repent, it means to change.

There has been a lot of change in our world and in our lives, in the last year, in the last two years, in the last twenty-one years since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and thwarted attack on the Pentagon. Many of us might be feeling overwhelmed or fatigued from all the changes, because many of these changes have caused losses. The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, not only caused the loss of thousands of lives, but the economy also suffered losses that took years – not days not weeks not months, years – to recover from. It also caused a feeling of the loss of security in our country. The Covid-19 pandemic has not only caused the deaths of over a million Americans, it has also caused losses to the economy and institutions, families and friendships. We could also say it has contributed to a loss of trust in the government and leadership, eroded the feeling of community, and care for the vulnerable and the common good.

Just like Joni Mitchell's song *Both Sides Now*, loss of innocent certainty, is only one side. There is the other side. Both tragedies did cause a lot of loss. And there was also something found.

A friend of mine was a chaplain at Ground Zero, serving out of St. Paul's Episcopal Church not far from The World Trade Center. He spoke of how Ground Zero became a sacred place, hallowed ground where there were daily interfaith worship services. The families of the lost, the rescue workers, the people who survived the attacks, and others gathered together every day outside to pray, regardless of their faith. They supported and cared for each other by being together. And they healed. Like Joni Mitchell, healing did not mean they were the same as before the attacks. They were changed, and their change was a type of repentance, because they had learned about people who were different by praying and worshiping with them. They experienced for themselves the joy loss and the gain together can bring.

This type of thing didn't happen only in New York. For a time, all over the country, people of all faiths intentionally came together to grieve, heal and to grow closer together in a holy joy. Here in Athens, people came together every year on September 11 to walk together along the streets, stopping at different churches to sing or pray. The walk started right here on this porch and ended at the Muslim center.

A year after the September 11 attacks, in an interview for the NPR program *On Being*, host Kristina Tippet interviewed a Muslim leader, a Quaker writer, and an Episcopal theologian. All three spoke about the pain of loss, and the joy of what was found in the aftermath of the tragedy. They all especially thought it was good we had a curiosity about religions we weren't familiar with and sought to learn about them. All three also mentioned their worry that society's drive to return to what they called "business as usual" would cause us to lose the joy that had been found, and the wisdom of what we were learning.

Twenty years after that interview, many of us who experienced beauty of creating new or deepened relationships during the pandemic or hoped what we learned would create a new respect for and effort to include the disabled have the same concern. Only now the words are "return to normal" where "normal" seems to be working at a job in order to consume and things like community, citizenship, and care for the common good are considered outdated relics of the past.

But whether it is called "business as usual" or "return to normal" it will not bring the joy Jesus talked about in the Gospel. The joy we can see briefly as 78-year-old Joni Mitchell who has lost a lot from a brain aneurysm, struggled daily to heal, to

relearn what the brain aneurysm took from her sings an old song with a new voice. Such joy comes when we accept change, when we are brave enough to grieve and heal, and grow closer to God and each other by making room for each other even when society that mistakes maturity for cynicism might criticize us for not getting back to what they call normal.

Today's Gospel reminds us there is something better than "normal", because what we called "normal" was never strong enough to nourish us during times of loss. What is strong enough to nourish us in times of crisis or tragedy or recovery is the holy kind of change, repentance. It is so good it cannot be hoarded like toilet paper; it invites sharing with others. This kind of change is a holy journey that will require work and effort, like the shepherd that searched for a sheep, the woman who had to go through a lot to find a lost coin and the singer songwriter who endeavored to learn again what she had lost. Through their joy, they all invite us to share the holy journey, the work, and the beauty of the transformation of the love that makes room for everyone on all sides. This is the journey where we will find God patiently, lovingly, waiting for us.