

Proper 19C— Luke 15:1-10
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Church of the Good Shepherd

Lost and Found

Reading today's gospel lesson, the question that I have is, *Just who is Jesus talking to?* I mean, the way Luke tells it, there were two groups present in today's story. First, there were the Pharisees and scribes, the respectable, decent folks, who sneer at Jesus for the bad company he was keeping. Then, there were the "tax collectors and sinners," the disreputable sort, who are the cause of the Pharisees' grumbling. So when Luke says in verse 3 that Jesus "told *them* this parable," it's not clear who are the "them" Luke is referring to: is it the "tax collectors and sinners" gathered around him for dinner or was the "them" the eye-rolling and snippy Pharisees who are snarking at Jesus from a distance? In truth, it is probably both, and yet it is helpful to consider how differently the stories Jesus told sounded to each of these groups.

Let's start with the "bad company" who were partying with Jesus. Luke describes them as "tax-collectors and sinners." Tax-collectors are pretty straightforward. They were Jews who worked for the Roman occupiers, extorting—I mean, collecting—taxes for the oppressors while skimming off some for themselves. To be a tax collector in Jesus' day meant you were hated and shunned by your fellow countrymen for collaborating with the enemy. Easy enough to understand. But just who these "sinners" were that Luke is talking about is a little harder for us to pin down. I mean, "sinner" didn't refer to people in general, as in "we're all sinners." It was a clear category of person. It was someone whose pattern of sinning was so habitual, so blatant that the whole community knew of it. They would be the hard-living lot who hung out at bars and pool halls, the pushers and pimps and prostitutes on the street corners, the ones who are always in trouble with the law, the ne'er-do-wells, the moral disgraces and public outcasts—you know, the types your parents warned you about. When Jesus starts hanging out with them, decent folk were—quite understandably—concerned.

If the tax-collectors and sinners had any doubt about where they fell in the moral order, all they had to do was look over their shoulders at the scolding religious leaders looking in through the windows. The Pharisees and company never failed to let people like these know that they were the wrong sort of people, that they were lost to God, that there was no place for them among "God's chosen." The only thing they would do would be to corrupt everyone else—you know, one bad apple spoils the bunch. To the religious establishment, they were quite literally "lost causes." So it would never have occurred to the Pharisees to reach out to such sinners.

It reminds me of the wonderfully poignant and humorous movie *Babe* that came out some years ago -- you know, the one with the talking animals. A running theme throughout the movie is that the animals on Hoggett Farm all had pre-conceived notions about one another: the sheep were convinced that dogs were stupid, and dogs were convinced that sheep were stupid and—as the narrator often intoned—nothing would convince them otherwise. "The way things are is the way things are," the animal characters would say to one another as a way to bolster their iron-clad worldviews.

It was the same for the Pharisees. In the Pharisees' mind, there were the good, righteous people—people whom God could not fail to love because they did exactly what God expected of them. But then there were people like tax collectors and prostitutes whom God could not possibly love no matter what. There was nothing the Pharisees -- or anyone else for that matter -- could do to change that circumstance. They simply were a lost cause. And likely the “sinners” believed it too, believed that they were destined to be forever lost, and there was nothing that could be done about it. As the animals in *Babe* said—“The way things are is the way things are.”

But then Jesus comes in telling a crazy story about a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to fend for themselves in the wilderness, unprotected, so that he could chase after the one who was dumb enough to wander off by itself. And when he finds it, he comes back and what does he do? He throws a party for his friends. Then Jesus tells another story about a woman who turns her house upside down looking for a lost coin. She spends the whole day looking for this coin which was probably worth a day's wages. And when she finds it, she comes running out into the yard, calling to everybody up and down the street, "Come party with me! I found my quarter!" If the behavior of the two characters wasn't strange enough, Jesus says that this is what God is like, like a crazy shepherd and a mad cleaning lady, obsessed with finding what was lost.

If you fit into the category of a “lost cause” and you heard Jesus tell these stories about how God goes out of his way to find the lost, it must have sounded like Good News for sure. And when Jesus suggested that God gets more joy from someone who was lost returning to the fold than the multitude who are already there, if you hadn't fallen over laughing at the absurdity, you'd be grabbing onto something to stop yourself from falling over, fainting at prospect at the surprise, the shock of it. For, Jesus is saying that in fact there is no such thing as “lost causes”—just lost and wandering people waiting to be found by God's grace. Where they looked in the mirror and saw broken-beyond-repair, Jesus showed them healing-beyond-belief. Where they saw nothing-but-damaged-goods, Jesus showed them good-in-the-making. Where they saw their worst mistake, Jesus showed them the price God would pay. It's little wonder why Jesus attracted broken people like this, “sinners,” people who figured they'd been utterly forsaken by God, who are now being told that in fact God cares about them most of all. Good News, indeed!

You can bet the scribes and Pharisees heard these parables very differently. In the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, joy busts out all over, and there is no mistaking the fact that the object of the divine joy is not the lifelong righteous obedience of the Pharisees but the moral disgraces that Jesus was eating with. If that weren't grating enough, Jesus goes on to tell another parable, which isn't part of today's reading, where the Pharisees come across in a rather poor light. I'm talking about the Parable of Prodigal Son, which we read a couple of months ago. In that parable it's pretty clear that the elder son who stayed home and now stubbornly refuses to join in his brother's welcome home party is meant to be the joyless Pharisees who refused to sit at Jesus' table.

Now, it's easy to demonize the Pharisees, to make them out to be parsimonious, self-righteous stick-in-the-muds. But the fact is they weren't bad folks. Likely if you met them on the street or in a social gathering, you'd probably have nothing but respect, even admiration for them, for they are the sort that have it all together. Decent, law-abiding, church-going folks, we might say.

It's not that they thought that they were perfect, it's just that they were actually and actively trying to live up to the Law. Interestingly, what they are upset about is not what Jesus says, but rather the company he keeps. He's hanging out with, talking to, and, most scandalously, having dinner with sinners. Doesn't he know that it isn't becoming of a respectable religious leader like himself, a "holy man," to associate with people like that? And to make decent, God-fearing people the butt of his jokes, while making that lot out to be God's favorites...well, it just isn't right!

It's clear, though, that Jesus doesn't give a wit about being "respectable." Nor, he says, does God. What God cares about is the lost and getting them found, and throwing a big party when they do. This is in the end what these parables are about—not about who's righteous or who's a sinner, or even about being lost and found. It's about a God so crazy in love with His children that He will do anything to find them. To find us.

It doesn't matter if we are life-long church members or newly saved drug addicts; whether you have a backlog of virtue or if you've wandered a far piece away from God—we are all the same. We all need the same amount of grace to get saved. Were it not for the wonderful grace of God, we would all be lost sheep adrift in the world and in danger of dying alone somewhere in one of life's many wildernesses.

When we understand *that*, when we remember that, when we accept our need for God's grace and forgiveness, just as much as "sinners" do, only then we will be able to hear these parables that Jesus tells as Good News, as cause for much rejoicing, for our salvation and the salvation of others. Indeed, when you think about what is the primary characteristic of the Christian life, what do you think of? morality, repentance, discipline, obedience. These things are all good, but they are not the primary characteristic. No, from the point of view of these parables, what is primary is joy, joy!— the joy that comes from knowing that you "once were lost, but now you're found." It's not about being good, but being joyful.

That's what the Pharisees forgot—how incredibly, unbelievably joyful it is to be sought, found, and loved by our devoted, desperate Father in heaven. They remembered the importance of obedience, discipline, morality and the like, but they forgot the joy of being found. Of course, that would require accepting that they were lost, something that they could not bring themselves to admit.

In our country, and throughout the world, millions of people are lost, not just the ne'er-do-wells and moral disgraces, but also the ones who have it all together. For even those of us who are lucky to have a life that seems to be going well, that doesn't mean we don't feel lost. Just about all of us have felt lost at one time or another. Jesus calls us to remember those times when we've walked away and been pursued, when we've sinned and been forgiven, when God has taken the initiative to find us even before we know we are lost and bring us home. Jesus invites us to remember those times, those experiences of being found, the joy we felt...and he invites us to share it with others, with others who are lost.

This morning we kick off our program year, when we "rally" the church for the upcoming year of mission and ministry. It's rather fitting that this lesson is the one assigned for this day. Let me

tell you why. Our parish is the Church of the Good Shepherd. We've got a big beautiful stained-glass window behind me, with Jesus as the "Good Shepherd," holding a little lamb in his arms. If you've looked at the window, you'll have noticed there are the two scripture passages quoted on either side of him. On the right, Psalm 23: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." And on the left, the Gospel of John where Jesus says "I am the good shepherd." These are both very comforting passages, with God and Jesus likened to a shepherd who cares for and provides for his sheep. I've been thinking though, there's another passage that's missing from the scene: the verses we just read, the Parable of the Lost Sheep. This passage gives us another picture of the Shepherd, one that is of a much more active, dynamic, engaged God, who isn't just sitting around in green pastures but who goes out and seeks the lost, those missing from his flock. I want to suggest this morning that we take this image of the Shepherd as our icon, our vision, our mission: "to know God *and make him known.*" Just as God goes out and seeks the lost, so should we share with others the joy of being found by Christ.

As Jesus says, such joy cannot help but be shared, throughout heaven and with others. It's contagious. It cannot be contained. Once you've experienced it, you naturally want everyone to experience it, too, to get in on the joy of it all. Indeed what a privilege it is to know that joy and to get to tell others the Good News, to invite them to come and join the celebration. What was lost, now is found. Let us rejoice! Throw a party even! Thanks be to God!