

## **14<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost September 15 2019**

### **Exodus 32:7-14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10**

A few things to keep in mind as we begin. First, there are actually three parables Jesus tells the Pharisees and scribes after he overhears their grumbling. Does anyone know the third? It's the parable of the Prodigal Son, which we talked about earlier in the year. We'll come back to it.

Second, this reading happens immediately after Jesus reminded the crowd following him that to really be his disciples they needed to pick him over everything else, family, friends, possessions. Despite this, all the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to listen to Jesus.

Now, remember that tax collectors were hated by the Jews because they worked for the occupiers, the Romans, and collected the Roman taxes. "Sinners" was a general term used to describe those in the lower socio/economic and religious class. Who generally were understood to participate in activities or lives that put them mostly outside the Jewish faith.

Yet, these still show up to come near to Jesus and listen to him. We know from the Gospel of Luke that tax collectors have been responsive to Jesus' call to repent. They show up to be baptized by John (3:12), the tax collector Levi leaves everything and follows Jesus (5:27-32), and there will be one more to come, Zaccheus the chief tax collector (19:2). We also know that Luke sees sinners as recipients of the good news, as those willing to repent. In short, both these groups are depicted as being oriented to discipleship, to following Jesus.

Then you have the Pharisees and scribes, commenting again on Jesus' sharing table fellowship with these...tax collectors and sinners. They frown with disapproval. To eat at table with people accorded social status and honor. A welcome and approval of the person received. The Pharisees and scribes also frowned upon his choice of dinner guest because it was understood that to hang with someone, meant that they imprinted on you. The language used was the same as that used to describe minting a coin. The blank gets the image of the die literally pressed upon them so they look like the die. To be around someone would leave an impression on you...in a very real way. You better be careful who you hang around with!

So, these tax collecting, sinning people are there ready to listen, despite what Jesus has said about the challenges of following him. The Pharisees and scribes are there too, but all they do is grumble. I've mentioned in the children's sermon about what that word in Greek means. You can just hear the Pharisees and scribes, "Look he has table fellowship with those traitors to their race and those sinners, why would he do that! God wouldn't approve of that...coo, coo, coo, coo."

Jesus overhears them and then tells them the parables. Now, most preachers focus on the search for the thing lost. How extravagantly the good shepherd and the woman spend, time, energy, and effort to find and recover that which they lost. But, if you look at the text, Jesus is telling this story for the Pharisees and the scribes. So, I think the emphasis is on the language around what happens AFTER the sheep, the coin, the sinners are found/have repented...turned back from their sin. The searcher invites everyone to rejoice and celebrate TOGETHER the finding

of one who was lost. The point being, if God and God's heavenly court rejoices at the return to the fold of one who is lost...shouldn't you just party with them? You don't want to be the guy off in the corner while everyone is having a great time just complaining about who go invited, now do you?

Think back to the third parable of the Prodigal Son. There is a banquet table there, too, right? And who won't come to the banquet? The elder son. Do you remember why? Yep, just like the Pharisees and scribes he throws a hissy fit. What does he tell his dad? You never did this for me and my friends! But do you remember what the dad said in return? You've always been with me and could have enjoyed this stuff at any time. But... how could I not celebrate this lost son, my own image, who has come back to the family?

Why do the Pharisees grumble?

Maybe it's a bit like the parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew. Remember that one? The owner goes out and hires workers throughout the day. The ones he hires in the morning for a full day's work he offers a full day's wage. The rest he just says he will pay what is right. Then he pays them off in reverse order. The one's who only worked an hour received a day's wage, and so on back to the morning workers who were thinking... "Man! Look what he gave them, surely we'll get more for all our hard work!" Yet, when they get paid, they receive... a day's wage. And are ticked. They grumble, "Hey, those bozos only worked an hour and they got a day's wage and we've been sweating our butts off and you give us the same thing as them. What's up with that! Coo, Coo, Coo" The owner says to them, "Guys...how have I wronged you? Did I not give you what we agreed? How have I cheated you?"

Jesus is saying to these Pharisees, “Guys... can’t you just rejoice that one who is lost has re-entered the fold? If God rejoices in this, why don’t you? It hasn’t hurt you in anyway for them to return, so let’s party!”

Jesus in the Gospel of Luke seems to know that the sinners get it, they are hearing and following him. So now he seems to be working more on those who just don’t get it. The Good News in all of this is that God won’t give up on any of us. The lost or the ones who never left.

Why, you may ask. Well, think back to the idea that if you follow someone they will imprint on you. So that you bear their image. Every human being bears God’s image, so if the good shepherd and the woman search so diligently for that which is lost, how much more diligently and extravagantly will God search for those who bear God’s image? Who, in a very real way, are a part of God.

Whether we have wandered far away from God in our lives through what we do (putting other things before God, denying the image of God within us through drug use, abusing others, hurting our fellow human beings in mind, body, or spirit, etc.) or whether we have wandered far from God in our minds, constantly grumbling against those created in the image of God and how they live, and why should we accept them into our fellowship, and what kind of example does this give to our children... coo, coo, coo, coo. Either way, God wants us at the table, ready to celebrate. And God will go to extreme lengths to get us there!

It can be hard not to be grumbling. I was just at a book reading in Iowa City for the book *Dear Church*, written by ELCA Pastor Lenny Duncan. Lenny’s story is incredible. He left an abusive home when he was 13, traveled the US living as he could, including being a sex worker. He was arrested for marijuana in both CA

and CO and wound up doing time in Federal Prison. While light skinned, he also happens to be black. Lenny couldn't get a job because of the prison and he couldn't stay out of prison because he couldn't get a job. Life was a struggle.

And then the Holy Spirit moved in him. It was at an ELCA church on the East Coast and it came when the church invited him to the Table. Despite who he had been. Despite the sleeve of tattoos down both arms. As he puts it, grace cuts like a knife sometimes. And he found himself drawn to these people. Eventually he found himself called into ministry and into writing about his experiences.

There is plenty that Duncan writes about that I agree with. That we need to be bold in our speech, because as Martin Luther says a Theologian of the Cross calls a thing what it is. She calls a spade a spade. So, we as the whitest denomination in the US, we need to name and deal with white privilege and the systemic racism that surrounds us. We need to be bold in proclaiming God's mercy and justice for all people.

But I also found myself grumbling, if inside, on Monday night listening to him. "So we're supposed to just go this way and not even think about those who disagree? At what point does the necessity of listening to others come in, coo, coo, coo.

As I found myself grumbling, I thought of this text. What was going on with me! Why could I not just rejoice that this one who had been created in the image of God was back at the table with us? Was it sour grapes? Was it my own white privilege and inherent racism being touched? What was holding me back from the celebration? Did I imagine God's love and mercy were finite? That Lenny was taking something from me?

Did I have some of the same concerns as the Pharisees... what if people start thinking we're like that? Surely hanging around with a tatted, black, former sex worker, convicted felon pastor will have some negative effect on me!

I don't know exactly what it was, my siblings in Christ, but it was real. And then I thought of this text. And the others we have today that paint a picture of God.

Paul in First Timothy, because I was a sinner, I received mercy...because Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the foremost. I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, a man of violence. But God met me with mercy, grace, faith, and love.

Psalm 51- I know my offense and my sin is ever before me. You are right when you judge me, God! Have mercy on me. Wash me, remove my sins, create in me a clean heart O God and renew a right spirit within me.

Our God is the one who is merciful towards sinners, who invites murderers to lead God's people, who forgives sin, blots it out as if it never was, who rejoices with the heavenly court when even one sinner repents, turns back from their sin.

And this same God has infinite patience with us who have already been turned around, who have been claimed by God already in baptism, but who forget that we are not about grumbling in the corner, but rejoicing! Because we know that we too have a God who loves us, even in our grumbling. Who wants us to join the party and celebrate?

Our first orientation, like that of God and his heavenly court, should be to rejoice! To celebrate whenever one who is lost has been found. Whether it's in baptism like we will for Bria at the 10:30 am service. Or for a tatted, ex-felon like Lenny

Duncan. There will be time to engage with one another as siblings in Christ, to ponder how best to live out this life as those claimed by God. But we will do so as family. Knowing at the end of the day we will gather around the Table and celebrate the feast at which Jesus is the host and all are welcome.

In a world that seems bent on declaring who is and is not able to participate based on who they are. What good news this is! So, if you are a sinner, welcome to the table, come and eat there is plenty. If you are inclined to grumble. Hear the call to Jesus to rejoice with the heavenly court that those who are lost have been found. Come, let us eat together and receive the imprint of Jesus upon our lives. That we might go and proclaim this great feast to others.