

14th Sunday after Pentecost September 11 2022

Luke 15:1-10

As we begin, remember, in Luke 14, Jesus had just been at a dinner party for the leader of the Pharisees. He had been eating with the very people who now grumble and grouse about Jesus receiving and even eating with tax collectors and sinners. Who fault him for who he shares table fellowship with.

When he hears these complaints, Jesus doesn't clap back with a sharp-witted critique to own them. He knows that isn't how you change people's minds. Instead, he sits back and says, "Let me tell you a story." In both parables, Jesus tells the story in such a way that the natural response would be, "Well of course I would do the same thing. Of course, I would leave the 99 and go searching for the lost sheep and invite my friends to rejoice with me when I bring it back to the fold. Of course, I would use a precious resource like oil for the lamp to search for the lost coin and when I find it, rejoice with my neighbors. Of course, I would rejoice when something precious that has been lost is found and invite others to rejoice as well."

The point Jesus is trying to make is both that the sinners and tax collectors are those precious things that have been found, but also that the response of the Pharisees to that- grumbling, grouching, complaining- is misplaced. Instead, the invitation is to join heaven and rejoice.

Why is it that often the first thing we seem to want to do is grumble, grouse, and complain? Why do we seem to revel in taking umbrage? To being angered by such things?

We do it when someone else comes into some good news for them- a promotion or raise (well, we grumble, I worked just as hard. I've been here longer. Bet it's just because they're younger/older/a person of color/a woman/a man- name your specifics). We do it when someone else is chosen for a sports team or play ahead of us, wins the lottery, whatever it is our first reaction is often to grumble and grouse. To find some fault with what is going on. Especially when they are being invited either literally or metaphorically to the table that we sit at, or think is ours alone.

You see this even more clearly in the parable of the Prodigal Father which immediately follows these parables, particularly in the older son. Do you remember that parable? The younger son squanders his inheritance but when he returns is greeted with an extravagant party (prodigal even) given by his father. A rejoicing with friends and family at the one returning to the table. The older son, stalwart as always, won't come and celebrate- refuses to rejoice with his father over the son returned. He grumbles that he has been faithful all along, that he never had such a celebration from his father. He is the Pharisees! He is us!

His father wants both sons at the table, and he reminds his older son that he could have had this feast whenever he wanted. It has always been his. Yet somehow, he cannot see that.

Perhaps, he and the Pharisees get stuck in their self-righteousness. That they have done things the "right" way and that this welcome is not earned. That the sinners and the younger brother have not earned their place at the table. Because they haven't been putting in the work like we have to live righteously.

But they forget the whole point, everything at the table belongs to God. And God alone decides who gets it and how. They forget, that despite their “work”, they don’t deserve God’s grace any more than those they grumble about now. They forget, that what makes grace grace is that very undeserved nature. They cannot see that they too need this radical welcome from God. That their place at the table is just as undeserved and is given with just as much rejoicing.

Remember what Repent means in scripture? Repent means to change your thinking. To change how you see something. This is what Jesus wants for us, for the Pharisees and scribes. In the parable, the father tries to help his older son change his thinking. To see that this celebration of his younger brother does not hurt him in any way. Doesn’t infringe on his own relationship with his father. Doesn’t take one iota from him. That there is no reason to grumble, but instead a reason to rejoice! His brother who was lost has now returned! There is one more person to party with!

So often we are like the Pharisees, the older brother. When God’s grace is shown to those around us, we grumble and complain. As if that grace were a limited supply. We grumble and complain as we jealously guard what we think is our “earned” righteousness.

Let me tell you a secret! The love of God is boundless, without end. There is no limit to its supply. The love of God is not earned; it is freely given. It is for sinners and tax collectors and for Pharisees and scribes. It is for those who we think deserve it and for those we are certain do not. And it is for us. Because we need it just as much as they do.

In a world that is increasingly violently guarding what we think is ours by right, repent my friends, change your thinking and see something different. Jesus is trying hard to get the Pharisees and scribes to see things differently. To see in his choice of who he eats with not something to be criticized but something to rejoice over. To celebrate. For God will pursue God's beloved wherever they are. God strives to be in relationship with everyone- not just those who are considered righteous or deserving.

And once we see it. Once we get a glimpse of this new way of thinking, we can get back there again. It might be difficult, because we like to create rules and walls. To be right and have them be wrong. But we can get back there again, because God in Jesus Christ has shown us how to see. Because the same Holy Spirit that has come to us in the waters of Baptism and the Word of Jesus empowers us to do so. To see these glimpses of the reign of God.

While we so often are ready to grumble and complain, Jesus calls us to look at the world through eyes ready to celebrate. To rejoice! Rejoice in the changing face of the community of Ely. Rejoice when new people come into our midst, that others are getting a meal and fellowship. To rejoice for others who have a chance at life fuller and more abundant!

Remember, the root of the Greek word for joy is the same as grace. I wonder if this means that joy is not the proper emotional response to grace. Both grace received and grace perceived. Joy, that feeling of fullness, of God's presence, of bubbling delight when we receive or see others receive God's undeserved love, attention, forgiveness, mercy.

And the good news this morning is that grace is for all. Jesus will eat with anyone- those who have been members of this place that is St. John for decades and those who just walked in the door. Those who have wandered in the wilderness and those who have never left. Those on the left end of the political spectrum and those on the right. Those who do things the “right” way and those who do things the “wrong” way. And when we see one another, Jesus says, do not grouse and complain. Rather, see with the eyes of God. Rejoice, celebrate, give thanks- for as God welcomes the sinner, the lost, the wanderer, so God welcomes you to the table where there is always enough and more than enough. A Meal of bread and wine- Body and Blood of Jesus- a visible sign of this love of God for all and food to strengthen us to go out into the world a changed people.

So fed by this Meal, let us go into the world as people not of grumbling and anger, but of celebration. Let us go into the world always looking for things to rejoice in. Let us go into this world as God’s hands and feet, spreading the vision of God’s grace to all we meet. So that they might repent, change their vision, and rejoice with us in the overflowing love God has for you, and me, and all whom we meet. Thanks be to God.