

TEXT: Luke 15:1-10
THEME: Jesus welcomes sinners
SUBJECT: Jesus
TITLE: Lost and Found

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
15 September 2019
Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

These parables can be read with merit at face value even by children. However, I am going to give you a series of footnotes and make an observation or two that will shine a brighter light on this text revealing things not seen at first glance.

Tax collectors represent human beings who are attached to material possessions without regard for doing harm to their peers. The way you became a tax collector in Palestine in the time of Jesus was to place the highest bid with Rome for a specific geographical area. If yours was the winning bid, you had to provide Rome with the specified amount and any money you could collect beyond that was yours to keep.

Tax collectors colluded with the occupying power to enrich themselves at the expense of their neighbors. They were not the leading lights of their community, but public enemy number one. Tax collectors are a species of the genus sinners. Sinners are all people who oppress their neighbors.

Pharisees and scribes represent a constant hostility to the message of liberation. They interpret the religious tradition in such a way as to appropriate its meaning for their own benefit.

In verse two the Greek word “*prosdechomai*” (translated “welcomes”) has the connotation of hosting, making Jesus the host of a meal that is both literal and metaphorical. Since Jesus had no place to lay his head, this must have been a cookout.

Jesus excoriated the host of a dinner party for inviting only those who would enhance the host’s reputation. Jesus invites tax collectors and sinners along with Pharisees and scribes.

At first look the difference between these two groups is status, socially acceptable behavior, in short - righteousness. On second look we see a greater difference: the tax collectors and sinners are *listening* to Jesus and the Pharisee and scribes are *grumbling*.

Discipleship, faithful following of Jesus, begins in listening. If we are so distracted by who we are sitting next to, if we grumble about who else is at table with us, we will have a hard time hearing what Jesus has to say. Whether the church stands or falls depends on whether it practices or refuses to practice communal meals that are both material sharing and spiritual communion. (Sara Miles, author of *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*, at St Gregory’s, “God who I didn’t believe in was alive and in my mouth.”)

In the Gospel of Luke Jesus seeks to bring sinners to repentance, *but Jesus never calls out or persecutes a sinner*. Rather, he *invites them to table*. On four occasions Luke tells of meals in which Jesus is publicly criticized for his relationship with sinners, yet Jesus never comments on sinners’ behavior.

Jesus meets the sinners where they are, so they can meet him where he is. They meet over grilled leeks and lamb, bread and wine, and the sinners listen to what Jesus has to say.

Since the Pharisees and scribes are having a hard time hearing Jesus, he addresses them in a parable. On first hearing, we might conclude that anyone who cares at all about the sheep would act like the shepherd in the parable, which is why we need footnotes.

“Which one of you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine . . .” Where? “. . . in the wilderness.” A gospel song illustrates our first hearing of this parable: “There were ninety and nine that *safely lay*, In the *shelter* of the flock.” No. There is no shelter, only wilderness. The ninety-nine are left alone in the wilderness, vulnerable to prey, to thirst, to scattering to the four winds.

A sheep rancher from the Western plains upon hearing this parable was shocked and declared: “Nobody’d be such a fool!” To leave the ninety-nine is economic suicide. Jesus knows this and knows the Pharisees and scribes know this and that not one of them would act like the shepherd.

Enter, stage left, the second parable. Jesus contrasts the inaction of the male religious leadership with a woman who turns the house upside down to find the lost coin. Women served in leadership positions in Luke’s community. While the men refused to get their hands dirty to find the lost, the woman sweeps the house clean until she finds the lost.

How does Jesus know the Pharisee wouldn’t act like the shepherd in the parable? Because they refuse to eat with the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

After the shepherd finds the lost sheep, what does he do? He joyfully picks it up. Is it injured? Unable to walk? He carries it. It is heavier than you think and it stinks. He goes home, calls together his friends and neighbors, and throws a party. “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.”

Remember! The ninety-nine are still in the wilderness fending for themselves while the shepherd is home partying. Jesus is partying with sinners while the Pharisees and scribes grumble. The word translated “grumble” is literally “greatly murmured.”

The Pharisees and scribes murmur against Jesus like their ancestors who fled Egyptian slavery murmured against God and Moses while lost in the wilderness. To murmur rather than to listen leads to being lost in the wilderness. The Pharisees and scribes are the “righteous ones”, the 99 other sheep, left in the wilderness to fend for themselves.

They, like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son, are invited to the party but their righteousness prevents them from joining in the festivities. As long as they see themselves as better than tax collectors and sinners, they exclude themselves from the joy of heaven.

Gordon Cosby and his wife Mary were in New England promoting the work of Servant Leadership which they led out of the Church of the Savior in Washington, DC. They finished up a meeting late on a Sunday night and headed out looking for a place to stay.

The only room they could find was over a bar where a party was going strong. As they went into their room, Mary observed: “We have been with church people all weekend and not experienced a bit of the joy emanating from the bar below us. Why can’t the church be more like the bar?”

Heaven is wherever you are possessed by joy. Heaven is a dinner party hosted by Jesus, wine maker extraordinaire, a dinner party where the best wine is saved for last, where the wine never runs out. The only way you can miss this party is to grumble about the other guests.