

Scriptures:

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

Come Join the Party

I can't hear this scripture without remembering a sermon I heard preached almost 20 years ago. I was the youth worker in the congregation at the time and I knew one of the children of the man preaching was going through a really hard time. Robin spoke about a complete understanding of why God would spend so much time focussing on the lost sheep, because every parent knows when one of your sheep is struggling or lost all of your focus turns to them. I was a youth worker and a foster parent at the time and I thought I understood but now that I am a parent I understand even more what happens to your heart and your soul if your little one is struggling. So I wonder what it would look like for us to have the heart of God, to be like Jesus if we encountered someone who lost their way or someone who was in the depths of despair. This is what Jesus would do.

“Three times in Luke's Gospel, Pharisees invite Jesus to their homes; and every time the gala takes an unpleasant turn. At one gathering, Jesus bypasses the ritual purity of washing before the meal. Instead of apologizing for the oversight, Jesus thunders six woes at all Pharisees present, condemning them for their own impurity. At another dinner hosted by a Pharisee, Jesus rebukes his host for judging a woman who wipes and kisses his feet. The nerve of this Nazarene--invited by one of the chosen few for a dinner party, only to offend him in his own house! And now, at the home of a prominent Pharisee, Jesus' very presence attracts tax collectors and other sinners. The riffraff are infiltrating the suburbs and, once again, the party starts to sour. And it sours all the more when they see Jesus welcoming and dining with the wrong sort.

Hearing the indignant huffs of the Pharisees, Jesus responds not with woes or rebukes, but with stories. He spins a trilogy of parables, all of them with the same plot. A character is lost, that character is found and, to celebrate the finding, a party ensues.”¹

Three stories back to back that remind us that God's talent for finding us is greater than our talent for getting lost. But compared to the story of the Prodigal Son, that is about to follow today's readings the stories of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin are scant in detail. “They lack the conflict and the drama that make the Prodigal Son parable so engaging. These first two parables seem a mere preface, a mere overture to the lost son's return home. Perhaps the biggest reason that people like the final story best is that the subject of lostness is a person. Why does Jesus even begin with stories whose lost characters are a sheep and a coin? Why not launch straight into a story about a human being?

Perhaps he begins with these nonhuman characters because Jesus' listeners see the sinners with whom Jesus dines as less than human. Perhaps Jesus is stepping up to that high and holy crest

¹ http://day1.org/5216-room_at_the_table

from which the "righteous" Pharisees gaze downwardly at these lowlives who are dragging down the party. If so, then why not use a sheep or a coin as metaphors for these second-rate souls?"² On the other hand the man in that parable is at least somewhat well to do. He is not a lowly shepherd, but rather the owner of the sheep. And he owns at least 100 of them. One sheep goes astray, gets separated from the flock. The sheep owner leaves the other 99 to go seek out the one. Isn't that what any good business man would do? His sheep may not be gold but they come a large cost and if he has that kind of money one can assume that he has also hired someone else to look after the other 99.

"Good for him," surmises the Pharisee, "good for him being aggressive and diligent enough to hunt down that lost sheep. Sounds like an enterprising fellow. The Pharisees might actually stop by this man's celebration party. Then

Jesus moves on to the second story about a coin. "Once again, the other character is a person. But this parable had to be a bit more difficult for the Pharisees to appreciate. Of the three parties at the end of each parable, this would be the party least likely for these holy men to attend. The person in this story is a lowly woman. She is a poor village peasant, living in a house with no window (hence the need for a lamp). The picture is of someone of lower class than the sheep owner. Even the coin that she loses speaks to her being in a lower place. The subject of lostness is not a living, breathing creature but rather a thing, an inanimate object. Many suppose that the coin was a part of the family savings but, if so, it was not a great sum. The equivalent of ten day's wages at best. When compared to a sheep and a son, the coin is the least valuable commodity. But it is of great value to this poor woman, and she searches carefully until she finds it. And to celebrate her finding it, she invites her friends to come and rejoice with her." This however is not a party that Jesus' listeners would likely attend. The bash is hosted by a woman. We do not know whether this woman is married. She might be alone for some scandalous reason. She might be a single mother. If nothing else, since she is poor, she is perceived as cursed. There is no way the Pharisees would be associating with this woman. I wonder if they hear Jesus say that even angels rejoice with her.

I wonder if we do.

As I read this passage this week I did it in a context of having had an experience this week where I felt discriminated against for my gender and age. I was told straight out that I was not worth as much as a male colleague. I read this passage this week having been in conversation with someone who was being shut out for who they are and what was going on in their life. I read this passage this week having just been the one and only pastor I know of in town who would celebrate pride. I read this in a context of political mudslinging over past mistakes of current political leaders. And I began to wonder How do we treat one another? What do we do with one another's mistakes? What right do we think we have to judge others? "How often do we keep others at arm's length based on our perceptions of them? How often do we create a comfortable distance by categorizing them into a certain type? We like doing this because it gives us power over them. And by having power over them, we can deal with them as we please."³

² IBID

³ IBID

But one of the things that is most clear to me through out scripture is that in God's kindom we have no dominion over others, and we do not have a scale by which we rank their worth. Indeed, our own worth as Kindom-dwellers is found in giving up our power to name others. In Jesus' world, in God's kingdom the least of these are welcomed to the table. The table is set for the sake of those who have less voice in the social order of things. We are called to give ourselves to the people who like sheep have gone astray and whose cries are deemed less than human by so many. The kingdom calls us to love and have grace for the people whose plight gives them no voice at all, as if they are no more than a forgotten coin.

I read a story by The Rev. Dr. James Barnette that spoke to this context so clearly. I invite you to imagine a lovely Baptist church gathering.

A drunken Donny staggers in while folks are having a post-worship service reception for prospective members in a downtown church. Ordinarily, Donny would wander in before the worship service, asking for a few dollars but this time his arrival was later than usual. The prospective members, all decked out in Sunday best, try hard not to appear offended.

Like the woman searching for the lost coin Donny, who crashed the Baptist gathering, was no stranger to this plight of feeling voiceless. When he was not at the church, he would wander the Five Points area of Birmingham, asking for help. Rev Barnette recalled one time seeing tiny bruises on Donny's face, put there by a suited man who threw a handful of pennies in his face at point-blank range. Donny asked the pastor to imagine an entire day where your eyes do not meet someone else's, because not one person looks you directly in the face. Imagine how frightening the streets are at night, where screams are commonplace enough that no one even looks up to identify the source.

Rev Barnette reflects "often Donny would find his way back to the church, and there he would be found by those who watched for him, who ministered to him. He knew that among those sinners there was always a place for him at the table. It was a bit awkward, though, on that day he stumbled into the room with new guests and prospects. A middle-aged woman in finely coifed hair and a pearl necklace made a nervous attempt at conversation with him. "Donny, this is such a beautiful old church, especially the sanctuary. What is your favorite part of it?" Donny looked at her with bleary but eager eyes and replied, "Hey, I don't play favorites. I love all of you." None of us were quite sure what he meant, and most of us assumed that his words were filtering through an inebriated haze. "Oh," the woman attempted to clarify, "I mean the sanctuary where we just worshipped." "Oh," said Donny with his crooked grin, "Well, I mean the sanctuary you give me. I don't play favorites. I love all of you." I am still not sure if Donny was sober when he said that, but upon hearing it, the rest of us were.

- Are we the sanctuaries whom Jesus calls us to be?
- Do we love fellow sinners as freely as Donny does?
- And are we moving outside our own sanctuaries so that the Donny's whom we encounter might find sanctuary?
- Will we make room at the table for all sinners and outcasts?
- Will we do so for those most dehumanized? For those who have little or no voice?
- Will we welcome sheep of all varieties? Will we seek and find coins of all currencies?

- Or will we be the dullest Pharisees at the party?”⁴

In his recent memoir entitled *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts*, Neil White recounts his eighteen-month federal prison sentence for bank fraud. Neil is not sent to any ordinary prison, but to a leprosarium in Carville, Louisiana. He and other prison inmates--many of them convicted of similar white collar crimes--share building space with the last people in America disfigured by leprosy. In the early days of his stay, Neil does everything possible to avoid being near the Hansen's-diseased outcasts. He keeps his distance, even holding his breath if they come close to him. Over time, he befriends a number of them; and he comes to admire their tenacity as they cope with the cruelty of their condition and the indifference of the world that has forgotten them. One evening, the lepers are holding their annual spring dance. Neil and another white-collar inmate are assigned to set up tables and chairs and unload the sound equipment in the patient ballroom. The DJ begins pumping music out of the speakers before Neil and his partner can exit. Patients limp and wheel and slide their walkers onto the dance floor. Bandaged hands are lifted, wheelchairs are shimmying, and disfigured faces are beaming. An elderly woman motions for Neil and offers her hand. In a moment of joyful connection, Neil receives her hand which, despite dead nerves, feels soft and smooth. Suddenly two more prison inmates sneak into the party and dance among the patients. The first song ends, and the patients clap as best they can. Suddenly, a loud shout brings the celebration to a screeching halt. From his wheelchair, a leper named Smeltzer declares, "You're not invited! No inmates at our party!" The room falls silent, smiles disappear, the moment of joy passes. "You're not welcome here," Smeltzer yells, "Go on. Get." Quietly the four inmates lumber towards the exit door. As they pass through the door, an inmate looks at Neil and breaks the silence. "Good God. Did we just get kicked out of a leper dance?"

The Good News is that in Christ's ballroom there is space for everyone, even for the clean, healthy, antiseptic, righteous non-lepers of the world. There is a place at the table for the dullest of Pharisees and, yes, for the dirtiest of sinners. There is room for the most aimless of sheep and the most hidden of coins.

And always, always, there is rejoicing. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray. Almighty God, grant that we would make room at the table for all fellow sinners, that the lost sheep might find pasture, that the voiceless coins might be heard. May we shed our power to exclude, recalling that you shed your blood for all. And may the revelry that ensues be delightful in your sight. Amen.”⁵

⁴ IBID

⁵ IBID