

Sermon Text – Sunday, September 14, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Exodus 32:7-14; 2nd Reading: 1 Timothy 1:12-17
Scripture for the Message: Luke 15:1-10 “Until found”

I wonder if sometimes, so that we can understand Jesus, we must put ourselves in the place of those who are listening to him. Why were the tax collectors and sinners coming near to listen to him, and what about this made the Pharisees and the scribes grumble? Furthermore, how does Jesus’ response resolve the situation?

It seems to me that the tax collectors and other sinners were coming to hear Jesus because they knew they needed what Jesus was offering. They recognized their need for forgiveness and grace. Maybe they were more aware of Jesus’ teachings than were the religious elite. These were part of the crowds that followed Jesus – listening to his words about mercy, forgiveness, grace, and the kingdom of heaven. Even though his words at times were harsh and hard to hear, there must have been something that appealed to those who needed more than their society could offer. “Jesus seeks to bring sinners to repentance, but Jesus never calls out or persecutes a sinner. Rather he invites them to the table.”¹ I wonder if that isn’t what compelled the tax collectors and other sinners to follow Jesus – he offered not condemnation but joy and radical hospitality.

Nevertheless, when we think about it, we can understand the legitimate concerns of the Pharisees and scribes. By welcoming and sharing a meal with these societal outcasts, wasn’t Jesus condoning their sin? Did they need to apologize for the condemnation of lifestyles that are socially and morally unacceptable – do we? If their concern were to keep the lifestyles of the tax collectors and sinners from polluting their society maybe it was reasonable for them to question whether Jesus should validate them by welcoming them to his table. Maybe their concern was to maintain moral values and social order and maybe that fully justified their grumbling.

So church, do we believe that the separation of good and bad people preserves a community’s sense of righteousness? Where do we locate ourselves in the crowds, are we the ones who needed to hear Jesus or are we the ones judging? Maybe the ones judging are really the ones who needed to hear Jesus’ parables.

¹ J. William Harkins. “Theological Perspective: Luke 15:1-10” *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke Vol. 2*. WJK. 2014. Print. 82

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Jesus tells a couple of parables about the joy of finding what was lost. In his first parable he tells of a shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to go after one that is lost. Now, to me that does not sound very prudent – isn't the welfare of ninety-nine sheep more important than one? What if when the shepherd returned home with one sheep the other ninety-nine were lost? Of course that is me interpreting this with human logic.

The second parable seems more logical for the human mind to understand. It tells of a woman who burns precious oil in search of one lost coin and then calls her friends to rejoice with her when it is found. That makes sense to me – one coin might equal a day's wage and certainly most of us would take the extra effort required to recover a day's wage.

I wonder if Jesus' message to the Pharisees and scribes was that restoring one sinner back to God's kingdom was worth the potential loss of those who "need no repentance." Of course, we know that there are very few who need no repentance, so maybe the message is to the tax collectors and sinners – a message that there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.

Maybe, in this parable, the sinners are those so rejected by society or such habitual transgressors that a "righteous" person would be uncomfortable in their company. I am sure we've looked at people in our society with the same sort of discomfort. What would it be like, however, for us to welcome them? This may include undocumented immigrants, the mentally ill, LGBTQ individuals, or even those with whom we disagree politically and theologically. "When we see the face of Christ in the other, we find an invitation to recognize the unexpected deep joy with which God welcomes sinners."²

Do we think the sinners aren't worthy of Jesus' welcome? Do we think they aren't capable of relenting, repenting, and returning to the fold? Do we think that Jesus isn't justified to seek out and bring these lost sheep back home? Maybe those who can't be intimidated into submitting to the church's standards or forced to fit into the mold of our definition for a Christian should remain lost. I wonder if that's the perspective of the Pharisees who criticized Jesus. According to one assessment on this passage, "what is fundamental to all moral order and right conduct is not coercive power, not submission to authority or obedience to moral demand, not the intimidating power of fear and guilt, but the affirmation of

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our fellow humanity in the joy of a love that is freely given and received.”³ That is what Jesus gives these tax collectors and sinners who gathered around him, those he invites to eat at his table. Jesus cherishes the person; the ones created in the image of God the father – rather than condemning the sinner.

There is no one exempt from the pain of losing something made precious by time, devotion, or love. These parables are about restoration, return, and rejoicing. Even the Pharisees and scribes should realize that all people fall short and sin and get lost somewhere along the way. “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Knowing this we should adopt the same attitude as Jesus because those welcomed to Jesus’ table are us.

There is one phrase common to both short parables Jesus tells. Both searchers go after what was lost until it is found. There is no giving up, no abandoning the search. God does not abandon, Jesus did not abandon, the church does not abandon. We have read the encouraging words that Paul wrote to Timothy in his first letter – “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” We know that saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance – Jesus died for that very purpose. Shouldn’t the church then, for that same reason, seek out lost sheep and rejoice when they are found? Shouldn’t the church then as the living body of Christ welcome sinners and eat with them rather than passing judgment. One of the guiding stars of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is that all are welcome at the table where bread is broken and shared – that is one thing that separates us from other denominations, one thing that creates our unique identity.

Considering all of this, how do we respond to Jesus’ parables? As sinners we can respond with hope and joy knowing that the good shepherd seeks out lost sheep, forsaking the ones who need no repentance, until all the lost are found. As sinners we have hope knowing that there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. We have the hope and joy of receiving the grace and forgiveness that is freely offered. We have the hope and joy of knowing that God has not abandoned us no matter how far we have strayed.

If we were to adopt the perspective of the Pharisees and scribes, perhaps after hearing these parables we might finally get the message. When we did, we

³ Rodney Hunter. “Pastoral Perspective: Luke 15:1-10” *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke Vol. 2*. WJK. 2014. Print. 84

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could ask ourselves the question “what are we doing to help Jesus find the lost sheep.” As a church we can investigate what we are doing to ensure all of those who seek Jesus feel welcome. I wonder if that means the church must adopt an attitude of joy – worshiping and praising with joy, even when things don’t always go our way. Worship with joy even when we must sing without musical accompaniment, even when the sound system or the projection system does not work the way we plan. Worship with joy and praise God even when things break or people fail to live up to our expectations. Following the theme of Jesus’ parable, we could realize that it is the responsibility of the body of Christ, not just your pastor, to restore those who have strayed by welcoming them to the table, sharing the bread and cup that Jesus has shared with us. For that there is joy in the presence of the angels of God. We must keep seeking and welcoming the lost until we too can rejoice in the presence of God’s angels.