

Hope for Me

Luke 15:1-10

¹ Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?

⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸ "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

A *New York Times* travel article on pubs in Oxford commented that "a good pub is a ready made party, a home away from home, a club anyone can join." We can imagine Jesus in our scripture sitting in such a public house, eating and drinking with "anyone," to the chagrin of the proper and the pure. To be more specific, Jesus was eating and drinking with "tax collectors and sinners" while the "Pharisees and the scribes" were grumbling about the company he kept; that is, the company he "sought out," and "welcomed. **Scott Bader-Saye**

This crowd was pressing in around Jesus to hear his teachings. All manner of people made up this crowd or community. They gather around Jesus for a variety of reasons: the disciples to receive instruction; the Pharisees and Sadducees to keep tabs on Jesus' radical teachings; and the people who did not really belong anywhere because they had lived so much of life on so many fringes. They are described as the tax collectors and sinners, which meant that they were the people no one else wanted to hang around with, for fear that the reputation of the one would implicate the good reputation of the other. This is code for people like me and you. Somehow these "outsiders" had crowded into the community as well. This was a group of strange group, hardly a dinner list that

anyone of any salt or reputation would put together. Here they were, rich and poor; people with good jobs and people with no jobs; people on everyone's social list and people on nobody's social list; respectful and otherwise, all eating with Jesus. If a person is known by the company you keep, Jesus had completely thrown the community into a panic.

The side conversations begin immediately. The whispering started, "Who invited them? Why would Jesus embrace this woman, this man? Does he not know who they are, what they do for a living? Who is this Jesus? He talks of godly things on the one hand, and yet he eats with them on the other."

Perceiving the questions and responding to grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus began to address the growing division in the crowd by talking about the nature of God in terms they could understand. Jesus told a series of "lost and found" parables that have to do with homes and parties and letting anyone in. The issues were around who is in and who is out, who is lost and who is found, what does it mean to be saved by Christ, and what does it mean to be the community of Christ today?

Jesus approached the subject on economic terms, talking about things that they valued. He wanted them to think about what was most important to them. They might imagine themselves as a shepherd looking for a sheep or as a woman looking for a coin. For example, the shepherd values the health and the safety of his flock, his source of income; the woman values the hard-earned money she has scraped and saved to feed her family. Think of that thing most precious in your life and what it would be like to lose it, whether through carelessness, or intent, or theft. Something on which you place extreme value goes missing. You would be devastated. Not that you cannot continue; you can. People adapt all the time—but life is incomplete. Part of the whole is missing.

God is like the shepherd who values each sheep in the flock, like the woman who accounts for every silver coin in the purse. God treasures every child of the family. When one goes missing, God goes into search mode. God's nature is love, and love

looks like one who goes out tirelessly searching, because the one who is lost is so lost that she cannot find her way back home.

Woven in with the nature of God is the nature of the one who is lost. A lost sheep that is able to bleat out in distress often will not do so, out of fear. Instead it will curl up and lie down in the wild brush, hiding from predators. It is so fearful in its seclusion that it cannot help in its own rescue. The sheep is immobilized, so the shepherd must bear its full weight to bring it home. Similarly, the lost coin, an inanimate object, is unable to call out or shine brightly to bring attention to itself. Its rescue is totally dependent upon the woman's diligence.

Joan Osbourne sang words that express the longing of the Lost to be found: "What if God was one of us ... trying to make his way home." The murmurings of the Pharisees and scribes would judge Jesus by the company he kept, implying that the one who shows hospitality to the sinner is himself a sinner. The sinner would see things differently. Jesus understands the struggle with being lost, the emptiness of being separated, and the struggle to return. Jesus does not turn away from the sinners, but toward the lost, to make a place for them, to welcome them home.

Jesus understands that those on the fringe of the community (me and you) are integral to what the community in all its fullness should be, whether lost or have lost faith. Until they return, the community is incomplete. The parables are about a hospitality that seeks to forgive and restore. **Helen Montgomery Debevoise**

If for the sinners and tax collectors, doubters and skeptics, these parables are about being found...and I find hope because Jesus is looking for me! I am the lost sheep and the coin and I need to be found! Other times I must confess that I am the Pharisees and scribes who need to learn to rejoice. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin both end by calling together friends and neighbors to join in the celebration. Indeed, the movement of joy pulses outward from the one to the many, from the earth to the heavens. The party takes on a cosmic scale. Rejoicing itself seems to be the focus of these stories. So salvation consists not purely or even primarily in rescue, but in being

drawn into the eternal celebration. For the Pharisees (and for every critical, nay-saying voice in the church) the question becomes, "Who are you ready to party with?" If the answer is "We don't party," or "We don't party with them," then we have missed the whole point of parable of the kingdom. **Scott Bader-Saye**

These parables call the community of faith, us, to open our doors and rejoice. This call is repeated again and again. Sinners and tax collectors gather at the table with the Christ? Rejoice! Laugh! Be glad! They have returned home and now sit in the presence of God. The sheep who wandered off from the rest of the flock, lost in the thicket, is now safe and sound! Hallelujah! Worry no more! The coin that fell through the cracks was easily forgotten but is blessedly retrieved. We can feast! Hope is restored!

When one in our community goes missing, we are all affected. When one is restored, we are all better off for it. That is how it is in the household of God, and there is hope for you and me! **Helen Montgomery Debevoise**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).