

Rejoice with Me

Luke 15:1-10

In order to understand the scene of our scripture and Jesus' request for rejoicing we must go back a few chapters. In Luke 9 we were told that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem." On this journey from Caesarea Philippi in the north to Jerusalem in the south, Jesus instructs his disciples about what it means to be a disciple. Seventy of them are sent on a special mission, carrying with them no belongings. They went "like lambs into the midst of wolves" (10:3), but return with joy, because even the demons were subject to them. Repeatedly, throughout that section of scripture, Jesus spoke about money and its dangers, about the demand for repentance, and about the costliness of following Jesus. Frequently Jesus ate with Pharisees and with scribes, and on one occasion he confronted the guests and the host with their need for humility and hospitality, especially with regard to the marginalized and weak people of the town (14:7-14). On the occasion of our scripture Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. To be more specific, Jesus is eating and drinking with "tax collectors and sinners" while the "Pharisees and the scribes" are grumbling about the company he kept, "sought out," and "welcomed." In response to this muttering, Jesus told a series of "lost and found" parables that have to do with homes and parties and letting anyone in. The issues are 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' association with the tax collectors and sinners offended the Pharisees and scribes, especially since the sinners are "hearing" Jesus. "Hearing" for Luke was and is a sign of repentance and conversion. Like the prophet Jonah in the Hebrew Scriptures (Jonah 4:1-5), the Pharisees and scribes did not take kindly to the possible repentance of those who lay outside their definition of the redeemable. So the Pharisees and scribes "grumbled."

In response to the persistent complaints of the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus told three stories that served to critique their inhospitable character. Two of these stories comprise our

lesson for today. The third story is about a loving father and his two sons. These of parables give teachings of Jesus regarding the nature of God, particularly God's nature to forgive and restore God's people. The parables repeat throughout what forgiveness is like in terms of things lost and things found. Jesus challenged the hearers to consider what it means to be community and what boundaries, if any, community has. In so doing, he invites us to consider what God is like by considering our own experience.

The crowds were pressing in around Jesus to hear his teachings. All manner of people made up this community. They gathered 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 lived so much of life on the fringe. By describing them as the tax collectors and sinners, this meant they were the people no one else wants to hang around with, for fear that the bad reputations of the one would ruin the good reputations of the other. Somehow these outsiders had crowded into the community as well. Here they were, eating with Jesus. If we are known by the company we keep, Jesus had completely thrown the community into a panic. Therefore the side conversations began immediately. The whispering started, "Who invited them? Why would Jesus embrace this woman, this man? Did he not know who they were, what they did for a living? Who is this Jesus? He talked of godly things on the one hand, and yet he ate with them on the other."

Perceiving the questions, Jesus began to address the growing division in the crowd by talking about the nature of God in terms they can understand. He approached it on economic terms, talking about things that they valued. He wanted them to think about what was most important to them. For example, the shepherd valued the health and the safety of his flock, his source of income; the woman valued the hard-earned money she had scraped and saved to feed her family; the parent valued the happiness and well-being of his or her children. 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 wouldn't continue; you would. People adapt—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 diligent search.

The murmurings of the Pharisees and scribes judged Jesus by the company he kept, implying that the one who showed hospitality to the sinner was himself a sinner. The sinner would see things differently. Jesus understood the struggle with being lost, the emptiness of being separated, and the struggle to return. Jesus understood that those on the fringe of the community are essential to what the community in all its fullness should be. Until they return, the community is incomplete. Jesus did not turn away from the sinners, but toward the lost, to make a place for them, to welcome them home. The parables are about a hospitality that seeks to forgive and restore.

These parables call the community to open its doors and rejoice. 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. **Helen**

Montgomery Debevoise

One more thought...Jesus shared with the Pharisees and scribes a common attitude toward the tax collectors and sinners, namely, that the tax collectors and sinners were lost. However, these parables point out a sharp difference between Jesus, on the one hand, and the Pharisees and scribes, on the other, with regard to God's searching out and finding the lost. The point of the stories is twofold, emphasizing the compassionate concern of a searching God and heaven's glad delight over discovery, when one sinner, either tax collector or Pharisee, comes to faith.

If for the sinners and tax collectors, doubters and skeptics, these parables are about being found, for the Pharisees and scribes they are stories about learning 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. In fact, the themes of joy and celebration are paramount the point of both stories. Each story ends with a statement that there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (vv. 7, 10). The issue of the two parables is not to call sinners to repentance, but to invite the righteous to join the celebration. "Whether one will join the celebration is all-important, because it reveals whether one's relationships are based on merit or on mercy. Those who find God's mercy offensive cannot celebrate with the angels when a sinner repents. Thus they exclude themselves from God's grace." The Pharisees and the scribes put themselves outside the circle of divine grace by the way in which they grumble at Jesus' fellowship with tax collectors and sinners. There is no joy or celebration, no partying or delight, among the Pharisees and scribes, even though invited to the reception given in behalf of the joyous shepherd and woman. **Charles B. Cousar**

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. 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 those righteous ones are us. **Scott Bader-Saye**

Let me share two personal stories. For my 7th birthday my mother threw me a birthday party. It was my first and I was so excited. Since my birthday was the first day of school my mother went around and invited my classmates and their older siblings...I didn't get the message about the older siblings. When many that were invited didn't come she discovered that I had uninvited them. As you can imagine that was my last birthday party. My mother wanted me to be welcoming to all...a lesson I now understand. The other story I have shared before. One of our favorite cousins became a Christian when he was in his late 70s or early 80s. My mother made the comment that he had waited until he was old and ready to die...and of little use to God. A dear family friend corrected her by say "isn't it wonderful that God was so gracious to save him and us!" We all have salvation by God's grace whenever we accept that salvation.

Next Saturday we will host a Family Fun Feast. Our prayer is that we can welcome 40 families to the event with activities for both children and their parents. Many who come may be unchurched and not know how to behave themselves in worship. Will we just want them to receive salvation and then go be noisy and busy in some other church? In December we are planning an Angel Tree Ministries party...you know that ministry formerly chaired by Sandy Ryan and now by Linda Holloway, where we give Christmas gifts to children of persons who are incarcerated. Were we happy to give money and deliver gifts...but are we ready to welcome them into our community of faith...Unity Christian Church? We may think these stories of Jesus are about salvation for the lost, but I believe that these stories are more about repentance for those of us who are already members of the church. We are the ones who so often don't want to associate with "those kinds of people." It is when we repent that we can rejoice and join the celebration that it going on in heaven! May our prayers and action match our statements of faith and mission! Amen!