

September 11, 2022
Old Chapel Morning Prayer
Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28
Psalm 14
Luke 15:1-10

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

For the last several Sundays we've heard Jesus as he is teaching in various places in the community, and I want to put our reading in context. Just before today's reading from Luke's gospel, we have last week's passage about the high cost of discipleship. Then, shortly after that, Jesus says, "let anyone with ears to hear, listen!" And who comes to listen? Luke says, "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him." Of course the scribes and Pharisees didn't like that, and Jesus hears their grumbling, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." His parables about the shepherd and the woman with the coin are in response to their grumbling. In telling these stories, Jesus is showing everyone the extravagant nature of God's love, and how important it is to welcome everyone into the community—perhaps especially people like the tax collectors and the sinners. In these stories we see that the repentance of sinners, like the finding of a lost valuable, is always cause for God's celebration.

You might remember that tax collectors were despised by the Jews because, while they were members of the Jewish community, they collected taxes for the Roman Empire—so essentially they were collaborating with the oppressors. It was also a very common practice for the tax collectors to collect more than was actually due for the taxes, and then pocket the overcharge for themselves. Another reason they were despised. "Sinners" is a fairly broad second category that could include known prostitutes, thieves, and other people who would be considered sketchy characters by the community. All of these people would be on the margins of respectable society, and not folks that the Pharisees would associate with.

Yet these people, who would seem so undesirable, are showing the first sign of repentance and conversion: they are voluntarily listening to the good news. And the stories Jesus tells are about them. The first one, is about the fairly wealthy shepherd who owns 100 sheep, loses one, finds it again, and then rejoices that it is found. Not only that, but he invites his neighbors to celebrate its recovery with him. In the same way, the woman with 10 coins loses one—and note that for her, this is a much greater loss than one of a hundred sheep. In order to find it she turns the entire house inside out, and when she finds it, she, too invites her neighbors to celebrate with her.

In both of these parables, Jesus is talking about reclaiming something that is lost—but he is also talking about God. At the end of each story he explicitly says that the angels in heaven celebrate the repentance of even one sinner—even one! And notice that Jesus is comparing God to people that his hearers can relate to: God is like a responsible shepherd, and God is like a responsible housewife. God goes looking for the lost sheep, turns the house inside out to find the

lost coin—and when God finds them, there is much rejoicing. So Jesus’s two audiences—the scribes and Pharisees, and the tax collectors and sinners—both groups are listening. Will the tax collectors and sinners repent? Will they give up their sinful, possibly illegal ways and embrace Jesus’s message? On the other hand, will the scribes and Pharisees repent? Will they join in the Divine economy, and rejoice at the repentance of these sinners, and then be willing to sit with them at the celebratory banquet?

As we work with these stories, it is comforting for me to remember that Jesus loves me even before I repent. Just like he loves and includes the sinners in this reading. And then to know that when I repent, there is “joy in the presence of the angels” kind of blows my mind. And we are ALL sinners. As Episcopalians we recognize that, and we say the confession every Sunday. It can become very rote, though. Saying the general confession **can** be something we say without even thinking about it.

A few years ago I was sitting in the hospital with a man who had been successfully resuscitated after his heart stopped. He wanted me to tell him why he had been given a second chance at life, because he had not been a good person up to that time. He was pretty shaken, and told me about some of the things he’d done. “Why would God care enough about me to bring me back?” he insisted. “That makes no sense to me. I ain’t good enough for him to piss on.” I asked him if he’d ever heard the story of the Prodigal Son, and he said he didn’t think so, but if I wanted to tell it, he’d listen. So I began the parable, and when I got to the part about the son running out of money, the man said, “wait, wait—I’m remembering! He takes care of pigs, doesn’t he? And he eats their slop!” Delighted at his memory, he urged me to go on.

But when I finished, he glared at me. “You’re saying I’m like that no-count son, ain’t you?” I smiled, “Well, I don’t know. Are you?” He paused a minute. “Well if I am, that means God *does* care about me, don’t it?” I nodded. His eyes became bright with tears then. “Preacher, you give a body a lot to think on,” he said.

Jesus understands when we get lost, or hidden under the many cares of our lives, or led astray by the enticements of the world. And because his nature is love, Jesus will always come after us. Our job is to truly repent and turn back to him in love, as well.
Amen.

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