

Welcome Sinners

Luke 15:1-10

Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I'll admit, I struggled a bit with the Gospel lesson this week, not because there's nothing to say about two of my favorite parables in scripture, but because there is so much to say! But I think part of my struggle this week was that I was rushing ahead. I find that oftentimes when I read the Bible, and perhaps you experience this too, I find myself rushing ahead to ask the question, "So what? What does this mean for me? What does God want me to do with this information?"

Now, that's a faithful response—wanting our lives to change in response to God's word—but it's not a helpful starting point. This double parable today, and my struggles with it, brought me back to the first question we should be asking when we read the bible.

"What does this say about God?"

That's the driving question today! That's what kicks off the parables. Jesus is still at a meal with his followers and with the religious leaders. These leaders start to grumble against Jesus, saying, "*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*"

They are calling Jesus' character and ministry into question, because he doesn't keep the *right company*. What kind of rabbi, what kind of person, what kind of God would hang out with sinners? "*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*"

And so Jesus responds, saying, in short, "Obviously! That's exactly who I am! That's exactly who God has always been! Have you not listened to the stories of your ancestors? Have you not heard about the God who brought you the law in order to form faithful community? Do you not know the God of Moses who delivered Israel through the sea? Do you not know the God who sent manna to the lost in the wilderness? Do you not know the God of the prophets, sent to restore God's kingdom? Do you not see the works of God throughout the entire mission I've been sharing here? God is ALWAYS seeking the lost, welcoming the stranger, healing the sick, and blessing the lowly. I am always seeking the lost and humbling the proud. That's who I've always been, who I am now, and who I will be forever! Obviously you don't see this, so let me tell you a couple stories!"

And so Jesus launches into his parables, one about the lost, the wanderer, the sheep who breaks from the fold. He tells a story about leaving the entire flock to find one lost sheep like it's the most obvious thing in the world, but seriously, who would do that? He presents these options like they're plain as day! You leave the ninety nine in search of the one! That may seem odd to us, wasteful and even dangerous, but it's so incredibly obvious to God! Because **that** is who God is. God is the good shepherd, persistently, recklessly, abundantly, mercifully seeking those who have wandered away from the fold.

I'm inclined to imagine this first parable is for the so called "sinners" Jesus is chided for eating with. The outsiders, the wanderers who are so easy to dismiss as a lost cause. Jesus says, unequivocally, "You belong here, because I have been searching for you".

Then, I'm again inclined to imagine that Jesus turns to the religious leaders as he tells his second parable. He tells a story of a woman who has lost a coin, a coin worth one day's wage that she spends all day looking for. It's a wasteful search, but she searches anyway, because to God that's the only way. But the beauty of this parable is that it's possible for us to be so incredibly lost, even when we're inside the house. Jesus tells this parable right to the face of the religious leaders, those who's jealousy, indifference, and neglect of their neighbor has covered them with dust and forced them between couch cushions—lost coins in the house of Israel. Jesus says, unequivocally, "You belong here, even when you deny others their place, because I have been searching for you".

Jesus reminds us that whether we are wandering from the flock, or rolling out of sight here in the house, we all have the capacity to be lost. We don't hear it in our lessons today, but Jesus tells a third parable. It's one about a young prodigal, wasteful son who tells his father "you're dead to me, give me my inheritance." Then the boy wastes all the money in a foreign land and comes back home to beg his father for a job and a place to live. So the father runs to him, shames himself, gives his best robe, his ring, and his sandals. And he doesn't stop there... he throws a party! And in the midst of this party, the older brother rages against his father that a party wasn't thrown for him for staying. Two sons—one the wanderer, one lost within his own house—and a father who is relentlessly, wastefully, abundantly, mercifully meeting the lost boys with love and grace.

"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Of course he does. That's who Jesus is. Jesus is the one who will always, forever, persistently, relentlessly pursue you in love, that you may not be lost, but will rejoice in being found. In each parable, there's a party in the midst of restoration. We are invited today to a party, to a feast of rejoicing. In this place we have been found.

We begin worship each week by admitting that we are lost—both wandering far from the fold, and buried within the detritus of our house—and we cry out to God, needing to be found. We have all sinned, we have all fallen short, we are all in need of one who will love us to wholeness again. There are so many narratives in this world that convince us that we are not worthy, that we are lacking, that we are lost for good. Even a reading of the bible that drives us to ask "what do I need to do" is part of this way of scarcity all around us.

And in this confession we are met with abundance. We hear that sinners are redeemed and welcome. We hear that Christ has died for us, and that his love is here to sustain us and send us out in love.

I know there is a call to be transformed by this good news. There is a call to orient our lives around this work of liberation and seek the same liberation for all our neighbors in need. There is an earnest call to repentance and new life. But those are all good answers to the second question. Today I want to answer the question, "what does this say about God?"

Today I pray that we hear grace.

The Rev. Alex Zuber

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Muhlenberg Lutheran Church

I pray that we hear these parables purely, a true testament to God's relentless pursuit of each of us. I pray that we hear of God's love for us. I pray that we hear of God's deep delight in finding us and making us whole again. I pray that we join in rejoicing with all the angles at this work of restoration.

"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Indeed he does. So Welcome Sinners! Come, let us take our place at the feast.

Amen.