

* He Welcomes Sinners

Luke 15: 1 – 10

We're going to be spending 5 weeks in Luke chapter 15, so it is very important, I think, to carefully point out that the first two verses here provide the setting for the entire chapter. These two verses tell us that there were some religious leaders who were noticing something about Jesus – something that bothered them greatly. Jesus, you see, seems to attract and befriend “Tax collectors and sinners” – i.e., the moral outcasts of a respectable society. They are hanging around Jesus, or he hangs around them; either way, these religious leaders find this to be troublesome.

So, in verse 2 we read that they “muttered” to one another about this. Now, anyone who has raised children, or who can remember what it was like to be a teenager knows what “muttering” is, right? We've heard it, we've done it. These are words that are spoken softly enough that their object isn't directly addressed, but still, loudly enough that that person is sure to hear. Muttering, in that sense, is always passive/ aggressive, and therefore annoying!

We're not told what they were ‘muttering’, but we can easily imagine. “He welcomes sinners!” (You can put the emphasis on any of those words, you know what I mean?) That kind of person never comes to *our* meetings! That must be because he is simply telling them what they want to hear – he doesn't call them to repent or change! Can you believe the way he ‘dumbs down’ our sacred Law? It's a disgrace, that's what it is!”

Well, of course, Jesus hears them. And he responds to them. But instead of giving a lecture, or an extended teaching, he tells three stories – parables. In these three parables, and especially in the last one, Jesus challenges his listener's basic assumptions about three things: (1) who God is and what God is like; (2) about the nature of sin, and (3) about salvation – what salvation is and how we find it. In these three stories, Jesus gives them – the mutterers – an entirely new way to think about God, themselves, and the whole world.

This morning (tonight), in setting a context for this series, we're going to take a look at the first two of these parables. And I'd like to point out the three sets of characters:

(**) **1.** *the unwilling listeners* **2.** *the lost things,* **3.** *the joyful seekers.*

* He Welcomes Sinners

1. The Unwilling Listeners – vs. 1 – 3

There are two groups of people surrounding Jesus in this chapter. There are “Tax collectors and ‘sinners’” and then there are the “Pharisees and the teachers of the law.” “Sinners” we get, that; from too much firsthand experience. Apparently the ‘Tax Collectors’ were considered so despicable that they merited their own category. (Don’t think we don’t do that today, either!)

The second group (Pharisees and teachers of the Law) are the religious people. And these folk are especially offended that Jesus was eating with the sinners! Now, we’ve pointed this out before, but let me remind you of this. In middle Eastern culture (to this day, actually) eating with someone is a statement-making occasion. Not a casual thing.

We (in the Western world) will sit with anyone for lunch or dinner, we frequently have business meetings which involve a shared meal...there are Web sites which will link you up with someone to have a lunch date with, so you can ‘test the water’ and your compatibility, for possible further dating. If you don’t like their ‘look’ or if they pick their teeth with their fork, you can bail, no strings attached.

None of those things would have happened in Jesus’ day. Table fellowship was considered a sign of acceptance and friendship. Kind of a social contract. Remember Jesus inviting himself to Zacchaeus’ house *for dinner*? That was Jesus saying, “Zacchaeus, I want to be your friend! I want to have a relationship with you” And that simple act (as Brennan Manning points out) completely changed Zacchaeus’ life.

So here is a similar thing. The religious people are confused with what they’re seeing in Jesus. How can Jesus be so open to “these people?” This scum of the earth? Doesn’t he realize that they are the “Bad people”? Can’t he see that they are the ones who are the real trouble with this world? It’s *them*, standin’ in the need of prayer! (And, of course, by contrast, *we* are the good guys!)

* He Welcomes Sinners

So, again, let's keep in mind here that the next three stories, or parables, that Jesus tells were *all* meant to challenge the point of view of the muttering Pharisees. And when we get to the *third* parable, we will realize that both groups of people – the “sinners” and “religious people” are actually in the parable. That's why the last one, the story of the prodigal son, is Jesus' ‘final answer’. But that will come later! For now, let's notice how Jesus begins to challenge the Pharisee's attitude and categories of thought in the first two stories.

Let me say one word here about the Title of Timothy Keller's book, and this series of messages. We're not going to use the parable's traditional name. As we look at this parable in the context of the audience that Jesus was speaking to, it will become very clear that it is inaccurate to single out only one of the sons as the sole focus of the story. It's not about one son. Jesus starts the parable by saying “a man had *two* sons.” Not one!

So, the parable is as much about the elder brother as the younger, and as much about the father as the sons. Timothy Keller is convinced that what Jesus says about the older brother is one of the most important messages given to us in the Bible (and I tend to agree with him). The Parable might be better called the “Two Lost Sons”.

But he also points out something that I did not know before I read his book! Let me quote from Keller here: “The word “prodigal” does not mean “wayward” but according to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, “recklessly spendthrift.” It means to spend until you have nothing left. This term is therefore as appropriate for describing the father in the story as his younger son. The father's welcome to the repentant son was literally reckless, because he refused to “reckon” or count his sin against him or demand repayment. This response offended the elder son and most likely the local community...Jesus ...[shows] us the God of Great Expenditure, who is nothing if not prodigal toward us, his children. God's reckless grace is our greatest hope, a life-changing experience, and the subject of this book”. (And this sermon series!)

Keller points out that for centuries, when this text is taught in church or religious education programs, the almost exclusive focus has been on how the father freely receives his penitent younger son.

* He Welcomes Sinners

(Keller, p 9 - 10) "The first time I heard the parable, I imagined Jesus' original listeners' eyes welling with tears as they heard how God will always love and welcome them, no matter what they've done.

We sentimentalize this parable if we do that. The targets of this story are not "wayward sinners" but religious people who do everything the bible requires. Jesus is pleading not so much with immoral outsiders as with moral insiders. He wants to show them their blindness, narrowness, and self-righteousness, and how these things are destroying both their own souls and the lives of the people around them. It is a mistake, then, to think that Jesus tells this story primarily to assure younger brothers of his unconditional love.

No, the original listeners were not melted into tears by this story but rather they were thunderstruck, offended, and infuriated. Jesus' purpose is not to warm our hearts but to shatter our categories. Through this parable Jesus challenges what nearly everyone has ever thought about God, sin, and salvation. His story reveals the destructive self-centeredness of the younger brother, but it also condemns the elder brother's moralistic life in the strongest terms. Jesus is saying that both the irreligious and the religious are spiritually lost, both life-paths are dead ends, and that every thought the human race has had about how to connect to God has been wrong."

Have you attention yet?

2. The Lost Things (vs 4 -5, 8)

The first thing Jesus does is that he confronts his audience's categories about sin. What is sin?

Who, exactly *are* the 'sinners'?

(**) In the parable of the lost sheep, we see the shepherd going out to find a sheep. Interesting timing, Carol Talbot – who, with her husband Lee, are working once again down in Mitla, Mexico with SIL – sent me an email before she left last week responding to my request for sermon topics/ subjects. And in a kind of an aside, she made an observation (in typical "Carolese" candor) wondering why it is that Scripture so frequently talks about us as 'sheep to be led.' She asks, "Does God prefer docile, dumb animals? I prefer goats which are smarter, more independent and affectionate."

Well, I don't know much about sheep or goats (I remember visiting Lee and Carol in Mexico a couple summers ago that a herd of goats and cattle go up and down the road right by their little cottage at the beginning and ending of each day, so I'm guessing this is an observation from first hand experience!) But I think that the 'dumb animal' part pretty much nails the issue...

* He Welcomes Sinners

We're referred to as God's sheep because we are so completely helpless when left alone. Like sheep, we stray away, we get lost, we get tangled up, we are easy pickings' for predators – and when we find ourselves in these states, we absolutely cannot help ourselves. So in this first parable, there is one sheep that wanders away from the flock, and the shepherd considers it of enough value to go out to find it.

In the second parable we have a lost coin. Now, like a lost sheep, this *object* is also completely incapable of finding its own way home.

So, the three lost 'objects' – a sheep, a coin, and later in the chapter a *son* – all can represent people who are spiritually lost, far from God. And we could say that this is Jesus characterizing the people that the Pharisees view as "sinners." All three are lost, yet if you think about it, they are lost in quite different ways.

The sheep is lost because of its own lack of sense, its foolishness, we might say. The coin is lost through the carelessness or thoughtlessness of its owner. It didn't 'lose itself'. It *was lost*. And the son is lost through willful disobedience. Through his own choices.

Taken together, this presents a highly nuanced, multi-layered view of sin. It is not simplistic, it is more complex than that of the Pharisees, and probably most of us as well at times. Here's an example of what I mean:

(**) Take "Mr. Smith". Mr. Smith (not any of FUMC's Smiths!!) has a problem with abusive anger. He flies off the handle pretty frequently, and you never quite know what is going to set him off. When he does, he becomes verbally abusive and sometimes even physically abusive. Now the question is 'why is he like this?'

Does he have a genetic problem? Is this all a matter of brain chemistry? I.e., is his anger just a part of his inborn nature – these are the cards that nature dealt him and that's that? That would make him like one of those sheep in the first parable. Its just who he is.

* He Welcomes Sinners

Or, is his problem more the result of a bad environment? Maybe (as is frequently the case) he grew up with abusive parents – or inconsistent, or absentee parents. So maybe he, like the coin in the second parable, is a product of mismanagement by his “supervisors”?

On the third hand(!) – maybe his problem is simply selfishness and pride? He only thinks about himself, he truly doesn’t see himself as part of a greater community, and all his actions and responses grow out of that basic understanding (or misunderstanding) about life? In that case, he would be very similar to the first son in the last parable (the “Prodigal” son).

Which is it? Well, the answer is that usually, in varying degrees, it is *all of the above*.

Sin is deeply complex. It is inborn in us, the Scriptures tell us. We have a basic nature that is eventually, and universally, going to choose wrong. It’s who we are as human beings.

It is magnified by the sinful treatment of others. We do not grow up in a vacuum. The things we see and experience have a profound effect on us, and tend to shape us in ways that we probably don’t quite understand.

And sin is certainly deepened and shaped by our own choices. We are held responsible for our choices, too. So, Jesus’ view of sin is more comprehensive and multi-dimensional than that of many psychologists, sociologists, and many religious leaders. It is certainly more comprehensive than the view held by the Pharisees listening to him.

Well, that’s not all that happens here... Jesus also confronts their categories about salvation.

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If you ask people, generally, to give a definition of religion, they will tell you that religion is “humanity’s search for God.” I have found that most people like to think of themselves as spiritual seekers, as honest inquirers. Although, I don’t know how ‘honest’ that seeking is, typically, because when we are the ones who are setting the agenda, we tend to find only the things that we *want* to find.

* He Welcomes Sinners

We look at the religions of the world and we see this – while giving somewhat different directions about *how to do so*, they all seem to agree on one basic assumption: if someone sincerely searches for God, they will find him. Millions of people all over the world believe that, as a starting point.

Now let me make this clear: the Christian scriptures contain a promise (in fact, numerous promises) that ‘if we seek God with all our heart, we will *surely* find him’. But that promise has to be taken in the larger context of Scripture. In other words, that (i.e., our seeking) is not all that is happening!

The default understanding of human beings is that if we *do* whatever it is that God wants us to do, we will ‘find’ God. There’s a technique, a plan of action. And even Christians, by and large, accept that premise, too. By believing and obeying God’s law in the bible many believe, they can find God.

The problem with that is that anyone who feels that they have searched for and found God will naturally disdain all those who seem to be making no effort at all. Or less of an effort than they are. They will look at the ‘Sinners’ and say, “I found God! If you try, you can, too. I did! You can be like me.” And it’s a short journey from there to “You *should* be like me.”

But, you see, the Biblical Gospel turns this idea completely on its head. The *shepherd* (whom Jesus clearly identifies with) needs to go out to find the lost things.

(**) “*The Son of Man came to seek and save that which is lost*” (Luke 19:10). In the same way, the coin *cannot* search for and find its owner, can it? The owner, instead, finds the coin. The sheep does not search for the shepherd. This is a significant point, friends, a foundation to build on in understanding these parables, and the Christian faith itself.

And here is the first great blow to the world’s categories. Every other religion says that we can search for God and find God *if we try hard enough*. It is only the Christian faith that says, “No! God had to come down into the world to seek and save *us!* Salvation is, from beginning to end, something that God does, it is by *grace*, not by our achievement.

*** He Welcomes Sinners**

Now, sometimes we think we understand that (and likely we do – to some degree). But we're going to be challenged over the next few weeks, to think about what means more fully... and my prayer is that we will be set free! To a new, and deeper appreciation of God's amazing grace.

The end of each parable challenges then, not just the *categories* of the Pharisees, but their heart and their attitude as well. One last theme in each of these three parables is the joy of finding the lost. So Jesus is making clear to these folks that God does not look at spiritually lost people the way the Pharisees do. Because, you see, the Pharisees did not see themselves as lost sinners saved by grace; they disdain "sinners". They feel superior to them. But Jesus says, "All heaven rejoices when "sinners" are reached and found.

(**) Jesus is the Great Shepherd, even more intent and joyful in his search for us than the shepherd of the parable. And Jesus knew that he would be asked to pay an enormous cost, he would have to die to bring the lost home. But In Hebrews 12:2 we read, "for the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame". The joy he had in doing his Father's will and the joy he has in finding us – the objects of his 'furious longing' – is so great that he was willing to pay whatever price was necessary.