

Luke 15:1-10 – “Acceptance over Rejection” – Sept 15/13

Is it just me or is intolerance on the rise again? I don't know whether it's merely my perceptions that are changing, or whether it's the reality that's changing, but either way it seems that peoples' intolerance of each other is escalating. Over the past few decades many of us thought that our North American society was making some progress at reducing racism and increasing tolerance if not cooperation. Subsequent decades seemed to offer an expanding awareness of and acceptance of multicultural and intercultural cooperation. Ecumenical movements flourished for a time.

I was reminded of the progress that our societies had made by watching the movie “The Butler” on Friday night with Elizabeth, but any positive feelings from that were quickly eroded by watching the news, especially the flap in Quebec over religious symbols caused by the so-called Charter of Values, touted by its authors as an attempt at unifying but proving to be quite the opposite.

What's interesting to me is that this particular vehicle of divisiveness was created by the secular world of politics, the very people who abandoned the church in droves claiming the church was too much into rejection and not enough into acceptance. It seems that the secular world has learned well from the church how to divide and isolate, how to exclude those who didn't fit in.

Not that the church has either forgotten how or abandoned entirely all attitudes of exclusion and rejection. Even recently I met with some people from another local church who are interested in redevelopment and who wanted to learn how we here at Central had been so successful in moving our own plans and dreams forward. We had a long and what I thought was a good discussion in which I outlined how one of the keys is working with the people in the community, both in ministry and mission but also in listening to shape the vision into one that is shared by us and the community. All was going well until the very end, at which point I was asked point-blank how I justified an acceptance of gay and lesbian people set against what this person thought the Bible said. I was a bit stunned to be asked the question in this context but was able to articulate my reasons founded on all that I understand scripture to say about God's acceptance of anyone who professes faith in Jesus as the Christ. Funny, even though just before that happened I had agreed to cooperate and help this other church with their plans (and not for the first time, either) I haven't heard anything from them since!

This person was of course deaf to any discussion that what I do is perhaps a little closer to what Jesus actually did than what they do. And I can only guess that in their attempts to be “scriptural” they somehow have missed the scripture reading from Luke's gospel that we just heard. In spite of this being a familiar reading, yet as many times as people hear it there still are many who miss the point, or dismiss it as not relevant, and who fall into grumbling right along with the Pharisees and the scribes that “this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Today's gang of religious intolerants now even grumble about eating with other faithful people, never mind with sinners!

Today's reading is only one of several places in scripture that deal with this issue, and all of them provide a very radical answer. Mark 1:15-16, Matthew 9:10-11, Luke 5:29-30 are other examples, and we can note that the multiplicity of times the subject is dealt with is a clue as to just how important, just how foundational the radical answer is to Jesus' ministry. Even in our reading today from Luke, there is repetition to make sure that we don't miss the point of what Jesus is telling the people around him, telling those who would call themselves by his name, telling us.

But before we get ahead of ourselves in looking at the repetition here, we need to take a look at the introduction, the first two verses that set the scene. “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.” It's hard for us to understand just how repugnant that was to the Pharisees and the scribes. We've seen reactions from some of the more fundamentalist religious leaders in Iraq or Iran when one of their own sat down to eat or drink with some of the American forces or even those working with them? Well, it was not much different for Jesus. The tax collectors were Israeli citizens who collected the taxes for the hated Romans, and they were generally seen as

collaborators with the enemy. The ‘sinners’ were all those who for one reason or another were outcasts – impure, untouchable, unacceptable in the temple and indeed in the house of any ‘decent’ person.

Now recognize that the Pharisees and scribes were at heart decent people. It’s easy to dump all over them, painting them as wanting to be mean just for meanness’ sake – but that’s not really an accurate picture. Many – if not most – of them were decent, God-fearing, upright citizens trying to do what was right, and what was right for them included injunctions from their scriptures not to associate with sinful people. Some examples: Proverbs 1:15 – “my child, do not walk in their way [the way of evil sinners], keep your foot from their paths.”; Psalm 1 – “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread...”; Isaiah 52:11 – “Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of it, purify yourselves, you who carry the vessels of the Lord.” The Pharisees and the scribes were for the most part good, upstanding people who took their faith seriously. Who could ask for more?

So perhaps we can understand why they would grumble about Jesus eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners, and grumble and complain they did. It doesn’t take too much imagination to hear the uplifted noses, the tone of slightly offended disgust – and it doesn’t take too much imagination because we can still hear it today, can’t we? One of the greatest challenges the church of today faces is the subtle grumbling about “those people”, whoever “those” people happen to be. It’s a shame, but many people still prefer to hear a message of rejection instead of Christ’s message of new grace and acceptance. The message of the new covenant in Christ, repeated over and over in scripture, is about Jesus coming to assure God’s acceptance of such people. A message that is so clear here, and that – thank God – not only includes but emphasizes the rejectables, the throw-away people, the sinners like you and like me.

Let’s look at the two parables that provide the buildup to the one about the Prodigal Son, the parable of the one lost sheep, and the parable of the lost coin. These two parables are similar – in fact they are identical in structure and message, and so you might ask why use both of them? Again, the answer is repetition for emphasis – this was (and still is) an important message from Jesus. The lost coin parable is simple enough – we can all recall doing much the same thing, searching, searching, tearing apart the dresser drawers, lifting rugs until at last we say, “aha!” But the parable of the lost sheep starts to introduce some problems, doesn’t it? Have you ever thought, “seems kind of risky to abandon the 99 other sheep while looking for the one that’s lost”? The old gospel song that uses this as a theme tries to get around this by claiming the 99 were tucked safely “in the fold”, but that’s not scriptural – the text actually says the ninety-nine get left in the wilderness while the shepherd goes looking for the one that is lost. We begin to hear risk here, and persistent love that takes risks to find the lost. That risk certainly is the opposite of the kind of faith or sheep-tending that says, “well, ninety-nine isn’t so bad, we’ll take better care of them and just absorb the loss of the one”, isn’t it?

However, the real focus of the parables – and of Jesus’ ministry – is about that vital one percent that went missing. The real point of the parable is both stated explicitly and repeated to make sure that we understand the message that will be filled out in the third parable. That point is, “rejoice with me, for I have found the [sheep, coin] that was lost. Jesus even provides the reason and the emphasis as to why we should rejoice, declaring there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who feel they need no repentance. That’s kind of a slap in the face for all those who, like the Pharisees and the scribes, take some righteous pride in doing what they understand to be right, isn’t it? To someone who has never been lost, who has always been faithful, who has always done what is right, and good, and pure, this has to be a very rude and upsetting message, and we can imagine their reaction being very much like the brother of the prodigal son.

By contrast, however, hear Jesus' summary: "Joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Stop for a moment, and let that image fill your heart with warmth, and love, and joy. Imagine the angels surrounding God doing "holy high-fives", uttering loud exclamations of "Yessss!" as one individual finally realizes and admits that they can't do it alone, that they need God's help, that God has loved them and looked for them all along, and that only God can pull them out of the dark and lonely place in which they have been living. Can't you just feel the wave of heavenly excitement wash over you from such a picture? Feel, revel in the excitement, the joy, the rejoicing, the sense of relief bursting forth throughout the entire heavenly realm. "Rejoice with me", is the cry, as there is heavenly reason to rejoice that that which was lost has been found.

Now, hold that sense, that warm comfortable life-refreshing feeling of rejoicing for a moment. Hold it, and savour it, as you begin to understand that was the same rejoicing that occurred in heaven as **you** were found. Let the awareness start to grow in you that at that moment when you decided you could no longer do it on your own, that you would admit to yourself and to God that you needed God's love, forgiveness and help, that at that moment there was this same rejoicing in heaven, the same "joy in the presence of the angels of God" because of you. Yes, you. Is that not reason to rejoice? To rejoice over and over again that you, who were once lost, have also been found.

Now, if you're among the ninety-nine who were able to pound on the door of heaven and demand admission into the presence of God because of your purity and righteousness and sinlessness, then I guess you'll probably have a bit of difficulty joining in the rejoicing. You'll probably feel a bit cheated, as if all your hard (and often harsh) striving for righteousness seems terribly discounted, especially when there's no particular rejoicing over your hard-fought right to enter, and most especially when there's a huge party-like celebration going on over some poor sinner who just barely made it at the last minute.

But for those of us who were indeed lost, who at some point came to the realization that there was no possible way to live, to truly live, without God's love, and forgiveness, and acceptance; for those of us who have been able to admit, "Lord, I am a sinner – please forgive me and help me to live" there is in this repeated message from Jesus a real reason to rejoice. "Rejoice with me", he calls, and we who have been the object of such rejoicing are only too glad to join in, to celebrate.

Now, holding that feeling of rejoicing, ask yourself, "what can we do to join in the search for the lost?" I think the most effective way to help in that search is to first of all sense and live the joy and rejoicing in being one of the lost who were found, and then inviting others to share in that rejoicing. Remember how this whole discussion started, with Jesus pointing out to the Pharisees and the scribes why he ate and drank with sinners and tax collectors. Not just befriending the sinners and tax collectors, but eating, and yes drinking wine, with them, sharing their company, rejoicing in their presence, engaging them in conversation and reminding them that God's love, mercy and forgiveness is for them also. We have a good deal of that going on already here at Central – a reminder that next week is the Community Breakfast – and wondrous opportunities continue to open up for us to expand our ministries in the community. Standing on the pavement greeting people on Davie Village Day; showing up late at night to haul bread; engaging others in conversation at Starbucks or even a local pub. These are very practical ways in which we can join the search for the lost, the abandoned, the driven-away, and to whom we can offer the invitation to come, eat and drink with the Lord at his table.

"Rejoice with me", is the cry from the one who seeks the lost. "Rejoice with me", is the call from Jesus, proclaiming the reason to rejoice – the incredible and even shocking grace and mercy of God, in whose presence the angels rejoice over one sinner who repents. Rejoice with me, and give all thanks to God for his grace, mercy, and forgiveness in Christ his Son, and for the life-giving Holy Spirit, One God now and forever.