

Lk 15:1-10 – “Reason to Rejoice” – Sept 12/04

Did the opening verse of the Luke reading sound familiar? Familiar enough that you might have asked yourself “haven’t we heard this a lot?” I hope so, because this is a familiar and oft-repeated subject in scripture, and yet as many times as people hear it, there still are many who miss the point, or dismiss it as not relevant, and fall into grumbling right along with the Pharisees and the scribes that “this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Heaven knows there are people of faith who even grumble about eating with other faithful, never mind with sinners!

There are several places in scripture that deal with this issue, and provide a very radical answer. Mark 1:15-16, Matthew 9:10-11, Luke 5:29-30 are other examples, and it should be clear 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. Let’s put it into today’s terms, and see if the picture comes a bit clearer. Imagine Jesus as a holy man, an imam, in Falujah, that troubled holy city in Iraq. Now imagine the reaction as crowds of Iraqis who worked for the new Coalition Government appointed by the Americans, and other infidels gathered around him, and he not only ate openly with them but drank, and even laughed a lot. Can you imagine how the senior Muslim clerics would react to such a gathering? You bet! 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.

And the Pharisees and scribes were really 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. 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 good, upstanding people who took their faith seriously. Who could ask for finer people?

So 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. How did that come to be? At what point in the life of the church, Presbyterian church included, did people begin to hear Jesus preaching about not sully the pews, or the doorway, instead of hearing the message so clear here about rejoicing at the presence of the ‘lost’, the sinners, the outcasts, the rejectables, the “throw-away” people?

It’s hard to understand how people hear the message of rejecting those who are unacceptable in behaviour or character, when the message in scripture, repeated over and over, is about Jesus coming

to provide acceptance in God's eyes for such people. A message that is so clear here, and that, thank God, includes sinners like you and like me.

Jesus told two parables to answer the grumbling of the elite, the righteous, the 'good' people of faith – in fact he actually told three, but we are only looking at the first two. Keep that third one in the back of your mind as we look at these two. That third one is, of course, the familiar but hugely misnamed "Parable of the Prodigal Son" – which should be called instead the "Parable of the Forgiving and Accepting Father". You remember that one, where the son wants his inheritance up front, in cash, and heads off to blow it all. He winds up living in a dumpster, eating restaurant scraps, and finally comes to his senses, heads for home, and is received by his father with open arms and a huge banquet.

But let's look at the two parables that build up to that one, 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", isn't it? Unfortunately, we still hear that kind of sentiment in the church, usually in those congregations that are dwindling down in numbers.

There's another interesting detail in both of these parables, and that is that the lost sheep and the lost coin neither repent nor return – that of course happens in the third parable (the prodigal son) which is the climax towards which these two are building. We can assume that the lost sheep has been safely carried home in the arms of the shepherd, just like in the Sunday School posters of olden days. We can assume also that the lost coin gets tucked safely into a purse. But those are assumptions. The real point of the parable is stated explicitly, and repeated both to make sure that we understand the point 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. And in case we miss the point to come, Jesus provides the reason and the emphasis as to why we should rejoice. In the first case he declares there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who 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? Yeah, to someone who has never been lost, who has always been faithful, who has always done what is right, and good, and pure, that 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.

That disturbing, radical message is repeated in the second parable, although it's toned down a little and is less confrontational. Here it is purely positive, talking about the 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 "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, 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 especially when there’s a huge party-like “whopty-doo” going on over some poor slob who only just came to his or her senses to admit what a nobody and a sinner they are.

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?” Some groups feel the way to do that is to load up a van in the valley, head downtown to East Hasting, confront the nearest dumpster diver, and scream “repent!” in their face. I dunno, it might work, but there sure doesn’t seem much joy or rejoicing in that kind of approach, except perhaps in the van heading back out to the security of the rest of the ninety-nine.

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, and wondrous opportunities are opening up for us to expand those activities, especially in the areas of International Student Ministry and the Hummingbird [First Nations] Ministry. 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. All thanks be to God for his forgiveness in Christ his Son, and for the life-giving Holy Spirit, One God now and forever.