

“Disciples Welcome All” – Luke 15:1-10 – September 15, 2019

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In today's lesson Jesus tells two parables. In each there is person who has lost an item, and each person expends much time and energy to discover the lost item. And when the item – the sheep or the coin - is found, the person rejoices and shares their excitement with their friends in a party-like atmosphere. In each case the item that was lost was a part of a greater whole. It was a precious item to the person, worthy of the energy expended in the search for it.

Jesus told these parables for a reason. They were told in response to the grumbling by the Pharisees and the Scribes. These religious leaders were disgusted by the company he was keeping. Jesus was spending time with tax collectors and sinners. These were shady people. They were unclean. They lived lives according to their own sets of rules. They didn't conform. They certainly weren't part of the religious elite like the scribes and Pharisees. And neither were they part of the everyday folk, like the disciples and the others who flocked around Jesus to hear and learn from him. No, these were the ones who didn't fit comfortably with so-called polite society. They were law-breakers, they were the cast out, they were the dregs of society. And no self-respecting person would spend time in their presence.

In the parables that he told, Jesus would describe the nature of God. And in these particular parables, Jesus clearly made a statement that, in the eyes of God, no one was worthless. And in fact, that every one was quite precious and a necessary part of the greater whole, the greater community. No one is too lost to be worthy of being found.

What Jesus is telling us here is that God seeks out the lost. Diligently. Relentlessly. Persistently. God's compassion and concern for humanity is such that every single person is worthy to be found and worthy of being restored. And so the shepherd searches high and low, near and far to find the lost sheep. And the woman scrutinizes every corner, bringing light into every dark place, in a never-ending effort to find that which is lost. Such is the nature of God. No place is too far-removed or too shadowed to thwart God's persistent searching. A sheep has worth to a shepherd, a coin has worth to a woman, a person has worth to God.

Yet the Pharisees and scribes grumbled. In their eyes, tax-collectors and sinners were too far gone, too tainted to be redeemed. Jesus was wasting his time with the likes of them, and he was tainting himself in the process.

This comes back to the same message we keep hearing. That in God's eyes, everyone is worthy of being found. Of course, we humans are stubborn. Any one of us, no matter how open-minded, no matter how open-hearted, we each can find someone about which to grumble. There are people – specific individuals, groups of people, types of people that we, if pressed about it, we will grumble. Everyone has somebody to grumble about.

When we categorize people as different, we sometimes also categorize the differences as seeming to make the person or people inferior to us. They aren't worthy because they are actually "worth less" than we are. Their sin is so much greater than ours, they can't measure up. Their very presence somehow lessens our own worth, and we don't want them around at all. Keep them out at all costs.

This is what the Pharisees and scribes believed. These sinners were beyond redemption. It doesn't matter if the only reason they were sinners is because they were starving or poor or trying to provide for their families due to situations beyond their control. Keep them out. We don't care about their circumstances. Why? Because we believe that they are inferior people, and they don't deserve anything better. They don't deserve our help. Have we ever had those thoughts about certain people or groups?

Or, from another angle, if they are different from us, we may also perceive them as being dangerous. We don't find them worthy because they instill fear in us. We are afraid of what they may do to us, or we fear what they may take from us. And sometimes they are both – worthless and dangerous. Leave them be, we want to say. They've made their beds; they can lie in them. There is no hope of redemption. Lock them away and throw away the key. The world is better off without them.

We get into this mindset of placing merit over against mercy. And we resent the fact that God doesn't see people that way. God's mercy is pure gift. And that gift of mercy is available to all. And not only that, God will relentlessly pursue those who are lost, so that they too might have the experience of redemption.

This can be such a hard lesson for us to learn. Like I said before, we all have someone, some group that can cause us to grumble like the Pharisees. Why does Jesus care about them? Can't he see that they are worthless? Doesn't he recognize that there are just some people who are beyond redemption? Yet we see him chasing after them, wooing them with mercy and love, and always, there he is, bidding us to join in this welcome of all people – differences notwithstanding. And we cross our arms, and we scowl, and we pout, because Jesus loves us even in our narrow perspectives and sinful attitudes.

And then Jesus chases after us, wrapping his loving arms around us to hold us tight in his embrace, and he tell us one of his parables about God's love. Perhaps it's a story about a shepherd diligently searching for a lost sheep or a persistent woman looking for her lost coin. And whatever the story is, it always ends with the lost being found, the very heavens exploding in joy, and the angels dancing in celebration, because what was missing has now been found, and the group is now once again whole. Perhaps someday we will truly embrace the message of his story. Until then, he will continue to tell it, because he hasn't yet given up on us. And friends, he never will.

Tuesday, December 3 – **Decorate the Sanctuary for Advent** – 5:30 pm