

Intro notes to Luke 15

- 1) Preceded by Luke 14, in which Jesus goes to a dinner party at the home of a Pharisee
- 2) He healed a man along the way, on the Sabbath, apparently
- 3) He called them to invite not those with social status and power, but those with nothing but need
- 4) Challenging them to see the grace and mercy of God when they were so concerned about faithfulness to the law
- 5) He then left and taught the crowds following him with some hard words about the cost of discipleship and giving up home and property, making it about more than following the law
- 6) Is it any wonder he made the Pharisees mad?

One of the skills I admired most in my grandmother (besides her ability to grow a good tomato, of course), was her ability to tell us exactly how to feel in any situation. Dry pot roast? She'd ask, "Doesn't that taste good?" and there was no way to say anything but yes. Mushy green beans? She'd say, "I think these are the best we've had this year, don't you?" I'll give you three guesses as to what our answer was. Pick out the wrong clothes for church and she'd say, "Don't you want to wear the other one?" Again, there was nothing for it but to go change.

Now, she had quite the reputation in town, too. The UMW at her church, of which she was a leader for years, ran a thrift shop called The Mustard Seed, and I spent many summer afternoons poking through the books on the shelves and listening to her say, "I think it would be much better if we did this, don't you?" And poor Granddaddy. She'd say, "Gene, don't you want to do this?" and heaven help him if he didn't. So at least I knew that no one was immune to her. She was a good Southern woman, and she knew how to get people to do what she wanted, all in the way she asked the questions.

Jesus was a master at asking some of those questions that, like my grandmother's, leave you nowhere to go. In today's reading, he's responding to criticism from the scribes and Pharisees (the establishment) about the company he keeps.

This criticism is something Jesus heard fairly frequently: he spends time with tax collectors and sinners! He can't be righteous, he certainly can't be ritually pure, there's no way he can be the Messiah, if he spends so much time with those who violate the law. And they had a point: we are known by the company we keep, as any parent of a teenager has had to explain more than once. If we spend time with folks whose habits or behaviors don't reflect our values, we are likely to be changed by them. The scribes and Pharisees were doing the best they could to be sure that God's laws were enforced, that God's will was respected. All they knew was that there was a way to make sure that they were obeying God...and spending time with lawbreakers was not it. They had a very narrow understanding of how to please God by playing by the rules—all of the rules, and so their question was simple: isn't there anyone outside God's mercy? And the answer they wanted was pretty clear: they wanted to hear, "yes."

Jesus, on the other hand, rarely made things that simple. Instead of turning to the grumblers and berating them for grouching, instead of calling down lightning from heaven to smite them (I've got to say that if I had that power, I'd have used it), Jesus starts telling stories again. First he tells about a shepherd, a lost sheep, and the 99 sheep the shepherd leaves behind to find the one. Then he talks about a widow who puts her whole day on hold to find one lost coin...and the parties they both throw when their lost item is found. "Which one of you," Jesus said, "would not search for their lost sheep or coin?" Watch out now, it's a trick question. What Jesus is really asking here is this: Is there anyone outside God's mercy?

Is there anyone outside God's mercy? Is there anyone God does not love? Is there anyone God does not care for? Is there anyone God would turn his back on, walk away from, reject outright? The answer Jesus wants to hear, the only answer, the ones the scribes and Pharisees and often you and I have a problem wrapping our minds around, the truth with a capital T is: No.

No, there's no one whom God does not love. There's no one whom God abandons. There's no one who cannot be a part of God's family, and by extension, the church. No, there is no one outside

God's mercy. We can wander off and not realize we're lost (like the sheep), we can run away from home and be really about as ugly as we can manage (the prodigal son did that, remember?), we can be within inches of God's grace and just not see it (sounds a bit like the scribes and Pharisees to me) and God's love, grace, and mercy are still there for us.

Now, we know that these stories are parables, which means that they have many layers of meaning. Here's one of those layers: 100 sheep is a nice round number. 10 coins, or the paycheck for 2 weeks work, is a nice round number. They feel complete...so when even a small part of that number, as little as 1 sheep from 100 is not where it's expected to be, then our nice round number is no longer round. It's not complete. It feels like *we're* the ones who are missing something: missing a coin, missing a sheep, missing someone who ought to be here and isn't.

Our wholeness as a church is connected to who is here, who is a part of us. And we're not all here until we're *all* here, if you take my meaning. Ann Street Church is incomplete, without the presence of those who are in our community, separated from church and God, and maybe don't even know they're missing. We aren't complete,

aren't whole, until we have sought out every one who could and would be a part of us...and so we can't relax, can't feel that our mission is done, can't simply concentrate on the things that build us up (although we must not neglect them, either). And given that new people are born every day, it sounds like this may be a never-ending task.

But isn't that how the shepherd and the widow search for their lost sheep and coin? They represent God here in these two stories. So when do they quit searching? When they get tired? When the sun goes down? When they begin to sweat, or get hungry or thirsty? There is no point in these two stories where they give up on finding their lost ones...no time when the shepherd says, "Hey, it makes no sense at all for me to abandon 99 sheep in the field to chase down one little stray. There could be lions and bears about. I'm going home." The widow does not eventually lay down her broom and say, "Oh well, it will turn up eventually. Time to fix supper." And this is God's response to his human creations: when we get lost or separated, whether we know it or not, God is constantly, tirelessly searching us out. And calls us to do the same: to seek out with

diligence and gentleness those whom we are missing...the lost ones from our churches and lives and faith.

Now, here's the disclaimer: Do not chase anyone into the church with a broom. Do not go out into the street, grab some poor tourist, and physically haul them into church with you. These are not good ways to help people come to understand that God's kingdom is not complete without them, and they are not complete without God. Ann Street Church will not be held liable for your overzealousness! It is possible to take things too far! And no stealing sheep from other churches; I don't know what the penalty for sheep-rustling is with God, but I suspect it's pretty steep.

What this all means for us, though, is that there will never be a time when we can quit being in ministry to our community. We are not allowed to get comfortable and say, "Well, you know, everyone has the opportunity to come to our church. We worship 3 times on Sundays, 4 if you count communion. They know where we are...we'll welcome them when they get here." How will people find us if they don't even know they are lost, if they don't know what they are missing out on, if they don't know that we are no more complete without them than they are without us?

Remember that Jesus is talking to the scribes and Pharisees here. He's eaten with Pharisees and told them some hard words about parties: whoever exalts themselves will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Jesus has been careful to say that there is no one who does not need to repent, to re-think their thoughts and actions, and struggle again to live in the image of God. This is no easy road we're on together, friends: one of Jesus' key criticisms of the Pharisees and scribes was that they were so tied into the law of God that they failed to see and sense the love of God. And that love of God means that God always seeks us out, even when we think we're getting it all right, even when we don't know that we've wandered astray a little bit. It also means that there's really no such thing as 99 righteous who do not need repentance...they are just as lost as the one. So when Jesus said, "Ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance," I suspect that he had a little gleam in his eye and a little bite in his tone.

So if we are not entirely complete unless we're in fellowship with God and one another, and we're all in need of repentance, then I guess we're all a little bit lost. We all need to be looked for, and to be looking for others to join us in this family of God.

Doesn't this kind of make sense of the parties? When you have found something precious that was lost, when we together make one whole and holy family of God, when as the result of diligent searching and love, someone becomes a part of us, isn't that worth a party? Shouldn't that be cause for celebration? Luke tells us that this is the party: there will be more joy in heaven over the sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

The company Jesus kept was indeed sinners and tax collectors, fishermen and ordinary folk...ordinary like you and me. And if our attitudes and behavior are changed by the company we keep, then I want to keep company with the One who loves us enough to search endlessly, who waits for us through all our roaming and repenting, who knows we're lost before we do and always wants to bring us safely home, to make us whole, and help us be holy.