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Luke 15:1-10: Drawing Near

"Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him." In the Message translation the Greek is translated: "By this time a lot of men and women of questionable reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently."

People on the margins of society were drawn to Jesus. They want to be near him. They want to spend time together with him. They want to hear what he has to say.

Sometimes we forget that Jesus is winsome to those who are left out and scorned by polite and powerful society. We ought not try and shape Jesus into our image, but allow ourselves to be shaped into his.

And Jesus is drawn to these folks as well. Welcoming them to the circle of friends. Eating with them - a sign of dignity and friendship. Jesus spends so much time with the rejected ones that the leading citizens are upset. "This man welcomes outcasts and even eats with them."

In the previous chapter Luke records a parable Jesus tells about a wedding feast where those originally on the guest list have all kinds of excuses about why they cannot come. Business, commerce, travel, etc. So the host tells his servants, "get out into the city streets and alleys. Collect all who look like they need a square meal, all the misfits and homeless and down-and-out."

And a paragraph later Luke tells us Jesus is among the misfits and outcasts. Jesus hasn't just told a story of the banquet of heaven when we die. He is opening the feast in the here and now. On earth as it is in heaven. One commentator posits the North American church will die OR be inhabited by the poor and marginalized who make time to be with Jesus and with one another.

Unwittingly the Pharisees reveal they have better things to do than to hang out with Jesus and his lowly companions. Like the wedding guests who had all kinds of excuses, they too excuse themselves from Jesus' table. They mean to discredit him with their accusations of welcome. "He is not a leader worthy of following. He should not be asked to address the annual church conference. His reputation is suspect, his morality questionable. And if we had people begin to follow his actions it would lead to all kinds of problems, risks and immorality."

Jesus meets their accusation with a parable... three actually; we read the first two this morning. A lost sheep and a lost coin. A shepherd counts his sheep and discovers one is missing. "Which one of you does not leave the 99 to go and find the one that is lost?" It's an absurd question for Jesus to ask because none of them would. To risk the lives of 99 to find one? While the shepherd is away, what if the sheep wander into dangerous ground with cliffs? What if a wolf comes to prey on the animals? What if the neighbouring shepherd takes a liking to the abandoned sheep for his own flock? The risks are immeasurable. No one leaves 99 sheep to search for the lost one.

Only the shepherd in Jesus' parable does just that. The shepherd goes searching, calling, seeking, investigating until the lost is found. And when the sheep is located, it is not chastized, not reprimanded, not punished, but lifted high onto the shoulders in honour and carried home. Word is quickly spread, a party is begun. Neighbours and friends invited; the joy of the shepherd shared. The lost is found, the missing has come home. The neighbourhood erupts in celebration.

But Jesus isn't finished. Just in case someone wasn't listening closely enough. A woman has lost a coin. She searches high and low. Sweeping, cleaning, seeking, searching. Finally the coin is located! Word is quickly spread, a party is begun. Throughout the parable the focus is on the action of the woman searching, just as it had been on the shepherd seeking.

There is no reasonable "cost of doing business" analysis in Jesus' plan. Just abandoned passion for finding the wayward and saving the lost. And in the end honour and welcome bestowed on those the Pharisees deem least qualified for such an honour. To Jesus these are the most precious. "In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine respectable people who do not need to repent."

It is scandalous how much God loves those adrift and invisible. It simply is. We would like God to be satisfied with our church programs, budgets and committees. We may forget that God's goal isn't the comfort of a few, it isn't even the good works of the many, but the salvation of the world. This is a God who relentlessly searches, hunts and welcomes. This is a God who gathers back the lost. This is a God who makes repentance, turning around, lead to newness and abundant life.

I wonder where you are in this story this morning?

This is good news. Ralph Milton tells of the teacher who, for reasons of her own, asked her students one day, "If all the bad children were painted purple and all the good children were painted green, which colour would you be?" One very wise child answered the teacher: "Striped."

When I say "I am a Christian" Carol Wimmer

When I say..."I am a Christian"
I'm not shouting "I am saved"
I'm whispering "I get lost!"

When I say..."I am a Christian"
I don't speak of this with pride.
I'm confessing that I stumble and need someone to be my guide.

When I say..."I am a Christian"
I'm not trying to be strong.
I'm professing that I'm weak and pray for strength to carry on.

When I say..."I am a Christian"
I'm not bragging of success.
I'm admitting I have failed and cannot ever pay the debt....

When I say..."I am a Christian"
I do not wish to judge.
I have no authority.
I only know I'm loved.

These parables are good news, AND they are also a challenge for any of us who have settled down into the comfort of religious routine among friends. For God is always about finding and saving the lost, least and lowly and giving them a place of honour.

The parables don't end with the shepherd finding the sheep or the woman the coin. There is an explicit role for restoration to the community. The word is spread, the neighbours are invited - God's kingdom invites the reconciliation of people one to another. Repentance changes us. We are meant to be in this together. The role of the community on earth mirrors the celebration in heaven - there is meant to be rejoicing and relationship. When the church forgets this, we miss out on the joyous, riotous party of heaven; we miss out on our very purpose of participating in the mission of God.