

It may be that the author of Luke's gospel is building our sense of wonder so he can properly place Jesus masterpiece before us. The prodigal son is next in line, and among parables of losing and finding, the story of the prodigal shines brightest. And it is also possible that our mysterious, faithful author/editor of this account of Jesus life and ministry wants very badly to make a point about repentance - though I'm not entirely convinced that the two 'warm-up' stories that we have just heard are really intended to move anyone to an act of repentance. These two brief tales from Luke 15 are aimed at a particular audience, for a particular purpose; and it's not at all what you think.

"Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him." And we are inclined to accept this as only natural - Jesus being Jesus, and all. But they were not just listening, were they...

"This fellow welcomes sinners AND EATS WITH THEM!" There is relationship here - connections are being made; names learned and bonds of trust formed. That's what welcoming and eating together suggest to me. Think of the joyful chatter around small tables in coffee shops - or eager debate - or the rapt attention paid to that one, excellent storyteller...crumbs and cutlery and coffee stains ignored because the food (and perhaps even the conversation) have taken a back seat to the act of being together. This is - according to the gospels - typical of Jesus. Between crowds being fed from scraps, wrangling invitations from tree-climbing tax collectors, and "the water-to-wine incident" Jesus is at the centre of a fair few social events. And the keepers of religious order have noticed.

It's not that they object to people gathering together, but there are rules. Rules about cleanliness and godliness; rules governing the who, where and why of communal conversation about God. There is something powerful about a group of people gathered together in their humanness...and people who object to Jesus methods know a thing or two about power...and they have made a living out of measuring the worth of people.

I have a colleague to thank for this new 'window' on this text. Sharing devotions at ministerial, he read from a translation that used the phrase "notorious sinners" in the

opening sentence of chapter 15, and our discussion turned to what made someone's sins "notorious". And it occurred to me that we are only too eager to assign worth to ourselves and to others according to all sorts of random notions of value; levels of education, earning power, community engagement, ability to stay on the 'right side' of the law... Those who would chastise Jesus for keeping company with 'the wrong sort' are pretty clear in their understanding of right and wrong. And they're wrong.

Is one sheep worth more than 99? One coin worth more than a pocketful? Not in the ordinary reckoning of worth. But Jesus goes to great lengths to tell anyone who has ears to hear that God's interest in humanity is nothing like ordinary. Birds of the air; lilies of the field; the last shall be first; the weak, strong. How many times do we need to hear these things before we accept that we are more than our resume; more than our investment portfolio; more than our 'achievements' because we are part of the mystery of a created order that is loved beyond mere human reckoning...

So these crowds around Jesus - populated as they are by people of all sorts - these crowds who have been conditioned to believe that they are not worthy (for whatever reason) discover worth in the company of Jesus. He welcomes them; shares meals, and wisdom, and together they begin to discover that they've been included in the household of God (that they've never NOT been included...). There is great power in that. Liberating, live-giving power.

People are still empowered when they are gathered together without judgement. Out of the cold programs; Project Connect; the Salvation Army resource centre; the Mustard Seed. These are places where (ideally) people are given fresh advantage without judgement. There are still rules, but the rules are based on the certainty that everyone has worth. That is why Pride events are important.- for people are gathering and affirming their humanity.

The church ought to be like that - that has always been Jesus' point. A place where people were welcomed and fed - counted worthy without reservation. It was easy enough, I suppose, to turn to rules - to make ourselves safe from persecution - to 'preserve and protect the faith', but in the process the church became convinced of its own authority, and fell in love with the power it seemed to possess. That power and authority were illusions - with them, we created a new scale of 'worthiness' - and still, Jesus offers this simple, stunning story; One sheep. One coin. In a world where each is lost, and all are found.