

C Lectionary 9.15.19

Luke 15:1-10

Focus Statement: Jesus seeks out and finds you, and everyone else.

The thing I find the most interesting about this Gospel reading for this morning is how it begins. “Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”” When you heard it this morning, you maybe didn’t think too much of it. The point of these couple verses after all is just to set the stage for who Jesus is telling the parables to and to introduce who the “lost” are. But while we read Luke’s gospel as a series of short stories for convenience sake—it wouldn’t make sense for me to read the entire Gospel of Luke on a Sunday morning—it is not a series of short stories, it is a continuous narrative. So let me real quick run through the readings we’ve had the last couple Sundays, to refresh your memories and help you see why I find this intro so interesting.

Chapter fourteen started with Jesus being invited to the home of one of the Pharisees for a meal on the sabbath. Dinner parties in the first century were very transactional affairs. So it’s likely that there were a few reasons Jesus was invited to this gathering. One because as a visiting scholar who by this point in his ministry was traveling with a huge crowd of followers, Jesus probably had created quite a buzz at the synagogue that day, and the Pharisee wanted the prestige of hosting such an honored guest. But second, the Pharisees have already tried several times to catch Jesus working on the sabbath, an action that was seen as against the law of God, and several times Jesus had managed to wiggle out of their accusations by pointing out conflicting laws, so they were likely trying to catch him again.

Which, in verse two Jesus healed a man with dropsy and followed up with a challenge to the Pharisees about pulling children out of wells on the sabbath, so the Pharisees were right on, that happened. Jesus followed that up with a parable challenging the social climbing antics of dinner parties, so we're two for two so far on that.

But there's another weird aspect of first century dinner parties you may not be aware of, and that is that first century dinner parties, at least among the elite, were public affairs. They were not egalitarian affairs; everyone was invited to join the dinner party. But, everyone was invited to watch the dinner party. First century dinner parties were less like a party you might host in your home and more like the royal wedding or the Oscars. Invitations were based on social standing, but those who were of too low standing to be invited could sit in the audience and watch. And after it was over everyone would gossip about who sat with who and who was wearing what, who enjoyed too much of the host's wine, who had been snubbed, honored, etc. And just like at a royal wedding, the expectation was the invited guests would not interact with the audience. Unlike today, where the audience was on the far side of camera, the audience would have actually been in the room, but there was still an invisible fourth wall between guest and observer. Those watching were the audience, they weren't really there.

So last week, we heard how Jesus turned to the "large crowds [who] were traveling with him" and addressed them. And he addressed them with that really hard teaching on the challenges of discipleship where Jesus talked about "whoever does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters... and even life itself cannot be [Jesus']

disciple” and whoever does not give up all their possessions cannot be [Jesus’] disciple. It was a tough teaching, a real reality check about how hard it is to truly follow Jesus. And this morning we see that that very tough teaching went completely over the Pharisees heads, because they were too busy grumbling that Jesus was talking to the audience in the middle of their dinner party! The choice of the word “grumbling” is an interesting one for Luke to use as well, because it’s the same word the book of Exodus used to describe the Israelites complaints against Moses, after he had helped them escape slavery in Egypt and they were wandering in the wilderness, when they started to lament all the cucumbers they’d had back in Egypt, when they were slaves, and how they wished they could have cucumbers again. So there’s certainly a hint of melodramatics here. Jesus just told you guys, and some other people, about how hard it is going to be to be his disciple, and you’re mad not about what he said, you’re mad that he’s not paying attention to you and you alone. Maybe, Pharisees, Jesus can walk and chew gum at the same time. Maybe he can actually pay attention to both you and the crowds, and maybe, believe it or not, Jesus thinks the crowds too are worthy of being taught.

And then we get to the parables themselves. Two stories of people losing a small part of what they have, seeking after that thing until they find it again, and then once it is found, rejoicing in its return. Key to understanding the radical nature of these two parables is to know that for either one lost sheep out of a hundred or one lost coin out of ten, the prudent response, the practical response, would be to cut your losses and move on. The time and energy expended in seeking out the lost thing is not worth the value of the lost thing in the first place. And yet, Jesus told these two parables of people who do just that. So is Jesus

insinuating that even seemingly worthless things deserve being sought? Yes, that's certainly part of what's going on here. And that's a huge good news piece. God seeks out and finds every sheep, even one sheep lost is a missing sheep too many for God. If you feel lost, if you've ever felt lost, that God is not going to discount you is some pretty stinking good news. I could say Amen right here and call it good, and that would be a solid sermon. But a question was raised in Bible study today that made me think that there may be even more going on here than just that. So verses seven and ten are the verses that loop the Pharisees into the parables, that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance. And the question that was asked was this, "what is the definition of a sinner in these verses, and what is the definition of the righteous?" And because I'm a good gospel scholar and I know that different words have different emphases in different Gospels, I responded, well, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus spent most of his time with those who were called sinners by the Pharisees. So sinners were those who had failed to live up to the Pharisees interpretation of the law. And by contrast the righteous were those who kept the law as Pharisees understood it, i.e. the Pharisees. But the theological definition of sin, *hamartia* in the Greek, is separation. Sin is that which separates us from God, a sinner is someone who is separated from God. Righteousness, on the other hand is to be in right relationship with God, a righteous person is someone who is in relationship with God. So could we say then that in the moment of being found, the righteous sheep is the one sheep who was found by the shepherd, while the "sinner" sheep, and sinner in quotation marks here because I mean sin as a theological concept, sin as separation rather than sin as a separating action, the "sinner" sheep are the ninety-nine sheep who are not with the shepherd. Booom [mind blown hand gesture].

Now, let me caution, please hold the sinner sheep thing super lightly because this is a sermon and I don't have time to unpack that fully. Attention studies say I get about twelve minutes, and I've already used like ten of them. My point is the Pharisees working definitions of sinners and righteous were wrong because they were based on what they themselves could do. Or, more realistically, thought they could do. But the parables are about sheep and coins. Neither of which could be held responsible for getting lost, and neither of which could participate in their being found. The sheep and the coin were not found because they repented, they were found because the shepherd and the woman found them. So, therefore, our righteousness, our ability to be in right relationship with God is not about us finding God, it is about a God who found us.

That, dear people of God is the real good news in these parables. You have been found by God. You, individual you, not in this instance you as the collective but you have been sought out and found by God. God values you so much that God stopped at nothing to find you, God left everything to make sure that you were found. Notice the tenses I used there, God values you, present tense, so God left everything and found you, past tense. I used the past tense there because the finding of you has already happened, you were found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. You, you alone, you as an individual, you who as the Psalmist said, God knew before you were born, you who God knit together in your mothers' womb, you are not lost, have been found.

You, precious, beloved, named and claimed child of God, and every other precious, beloved, named and claimed child of God who ever was and who ever will be. Because see God is

infinite and we are not. Which means God has that same all-encompassing, all-consuming, completely intentionally focused love for each and every one of us. God's complete and total attention and love for one of us is in no way diminished by God having complete and total attention for someone else. God too, can walk and chew gum at the same time, God can love more than one of us, in fact, God does love all of us. God's focus for each one of us is the same intensely individual focus as the shepherd leaving behind the ninety-nine to search for the one. Which means, and here's the piece the Pharisees failed to grasp, God was seeking each of them out with the same intensity God was seeking out those whom they called sinners. The Pharisees just didn't get to realize they were being sought, because they hadn't yet realized they were lost. Which is in itself good news. Because God is infinite and we are not, because God does not have to pick and choose whom God is seeking, that means that God is on a hunt for you even, and maybe even especially, if you do not think you are lost. So if you're pretty sure you're not lost, hold on to this promise for the days you feel lost, so when that day comes, you can remember that God has always been seeking you.

There's the good news, and here's the challenge. Since God is seeking out the lost, if we have been found and we want to stay where God is, God's with the lost, so that's where we too need to be. The challenge is we, like Jesus, need to be out with those whom others may call sinners, because it is among them that Jesus so often was, and it is among them where Jesus still dwells. You are found, dear friends in Christ, you are found, so go find Christ in others. Amen.