

Pentecost 14C (9/15/2019)

Exodus 32:7-14

Psalms 51:1-10

1 Timothy 1:12-17

**Luke 15:1-10**

*In Christ, barriers between insider and outsider, worthy and unworthy, sinner and saint collapse. All that's left is the joy of inclusion. This kind of fellowship undercuts the power of shame, thus strengthening the bonds of community. And, our unity in the grace and mercy of God is a true cause for celebration.*

Guess who's coming to dinner. If the meal is in your home or another private venue, the answer to that question is probably *someone I like, or at least someone I'm willing to tolerate for the length of time it takes to eat*. If, however, the context of the meal is church, the answer to the question "Guess who's coming to dinner?" is more likely *at least one person with whom I'd rather not share a meal*. "All are welcome," we say out loud, but every once in a while maybe we catch ourselves grumbling quietly about people who seem perfectly comfortable at the Lord's Table in spite of their impropriety or grating personality or wrongheaded views or spotty attendance. *The servers just hand over the bread and wine with a smile and let them off the hook. It seems like an awful lot of grace for such a motley crew.*

And all of heaven rejoices!

Have you noticed that it's easier to confess someone else's sin than your own? Have you noticed that it's easier to spot the speck in your neighbor's eye?<sup>1</sup>

**We're adept at making judgments, often quite quickly, between acceptable**

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 6:41.

**and unacceptable, and these judgments invariably lead to distinctions between welcome and unwelcome, deserving and undeserving, insider and outsider.** This is the dynamic at play in our Gospel from Luke today. Jesus' two Parables of the Lost and Found, as well as the third parable in the series, the story of the Prodigal Son, together constitute Jesus' response to the famous complaint by the Pharisees and scribes: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Of course, it's meant to discredit him. **If right status is established by what or whom we avoid, then to willingly associate with unworthy people undermines Jesus' legitimacy. He can't possibly be a holy man if he befriends the unholy.**

But this critique unwittingly reveals the very heart of the gospel. Jesus' table fellowship with sinners and tax collectors epitomizes "God's powerful vision of the inclusive rather than exclusive new community breaking into the world in and through him."<sup>2</sup> **Worthiness is not a prerequisite for sharing a meal with the Lord, only hunger.**

Wooden communion tables are often engraved with scriptural messages that point to the significance of the meal – "Do this in remembrance of me," for instance, or "One bread, one body." But, one church in San Francisco has chosen for its table none other than the critical words in our Gospel today, reclaiming them as a statement of radical invitation: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." What a marvelous reversal, that what the world rejects, the host of

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<sup>2</sup> <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#resources>.

this holy meal embraces. So **as it turns out, what the religious authorities intend as a condemnation is, in fact, an affirmation: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Truly, everyone finds a place of belonging at Christ’s table, regardless of their merit.**

And all of heaven rejoices!

What is the practical effect of inclusive fellowship? What difference does it make? Consider those whom Jesus seeks out and with whom he breaks bread, those whom the good religious people keep at arm’s length. The invitation to the table is good news, but in today’s Gospel they suddenly find themselves the subject of a public debate. Imagine how uncomfortable it might feel to be openly identified as a “sinner” and “lost,” how humiliating it might be to listen to others argue about your place in the community.

But, **the sinners and tax collectors must have already overcome whatever shame was formerly wrapped up with their circumstances. Genuine inclusion has removed their stigma, and thus transformed their status.** Notice that Jesus’ parables make no value judgment with regard to the lost sheep or coin, but they do insist on great celebration at their being found. To borrow the words of one interpreter, “The emphasis is on the joy of recovery,”<sup>3</sup> not the indignity of being lost.

Jesus’ detractors, on the other hand, are still bound by a system of shame and honor such that they cannot celebrate Jesus’ wide-reaching hospitality. By

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<sup>3</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX, 298. See also Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 575-6.

striving to distinguish themselves from allegedly undesirable others, the scribes and Pharisees have uninvited themselves from the party. Their refusal to accommodate imperfection is the real scandal, and in a dramatic twist, they become the ones who are “lost.”

Richard Rohr reflects:

In the backyard of our Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico, a massive 150-year-old Rio Grande cottonwood tree spreads its gnarled limbs over the lawn. New visitors are drawn to it immediately, standing in its shade, looking upward into its mighty boughs. An arborist once told us that the tree might have a mutation that causes the huge trunks to make such circuitous turns and twists. One wonders how it stands so firmly, yet the cottonwood is easily the finest work of art that we have at the center, and its asymmetrical beauty makes it a perfect specimen for one of our organization’s core messages: *Divine perfection is precisely the ability to include what seems like imperfection*. Before we come inside to pray, work, or teach any theology, its giant presence has already spoken a silent sermon over us.<sup>4</sup>

“Divine perfection is precisely the ability to include what seems like imperfection.” Dear church, **we are all twisted branches, but we are rooted in Christ the Vine.<sup>5</sup> In him, barriers between insider and outsider, worthy and unworthy, sinner and saint collapse. All that’s left is the joy of inclusion. Once lost, we have each been found together at the Lord’s Table. And, our unity in the grace and mercy of God is a true cause for celebration.**

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<sup>4</sup> *The Universal Christ*, 55-6.

<sup>5</sup> John 15:5.