

“WHAT PLANET ARE YOU FROM?”

A Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, September 11, 2016

Text: Luke 15:1-10

“The Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them”

So Jesus told them a parable, and another parable, and a third parable. Lost sheep, lost coin, lost son.

We are not wrong if we think that those three parables are about the mercy of God. God, the shepherd, seeking the lost sheep. God, the woman who has lost a coin and cleans house until she finds it. God, the merciful father who welcomes back the prodigal younger son.

We are not wrong to be reassured about the character of God, when we hear these parables. We just have not heard the whole message.

I invite you now to consider another dimension of these stories, especially the two which are appointed for today’s gospel reading.

There is also a sharp edge in these parables. We need to hear it, because you and I are not only the lost sheep and the lost coin. We also are the lost Pharisees—and they were the ones who were truly lost. They were lost because they could not repent and see the world as Jesus saw it.

Parables condemn. And what these two parables condemn is something in us that judges and dismisses others as unworthy. Let me expose you to this dimension in these parables.

Jesus asked a question which people generally take as rhetorical, as though he did not want us to answer it. I think he did expect an answer; and the answer he expected was the repentance of the Pharisees and scribes who grumbled about Jesus welcoming sinners and eating with them.

“Which one of you,” Jesus asked, “having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’”

When I hear Jesus asking that question and I think about it, my honest reply is “Jesus, what planet are you from? No way I’m leaving the 99 in the wilderness to go look for the one that is lost. I’m cutting my losses. I’m not risking any more damage to the flock. What is lost, is lost.

“Plus, if I did search for the one and found it, I would not rejoice. I would give vent to some strong language towards that sheep for causing me all that trouble.”

“So no, Jesus, on the planet I’m from we don’t act like that.”

Then Jesus asked another question, also provocative:

What woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’

If I heard Jesus ask that question, my honest reply would be,

“Jesus, what planet are you from? No way my first instinct is to blame myself for losing it. My initial reaction is to lay the blame on someone else for stealing it. My first thought would be about that

neighbor who was over here the other day for coffee, and didn't want to leave. Or someone else. Maybe one of the family took it and spent it. I'm not starting by looking for where I may have lost it. I'm angry at others. Even if I did happen to find it, I would hardly throw a party. I would instead try to think of a better hiding place. I would never let on to the neighbors that I have those silver coins around."

When Jesus asked "Which one of you?" two times, he knew the truth inside us was that we do not love our neighbors as we ought to, nor do we care about them as we should. Our focus, first and last, in both these case studies, would be on the word "my." "My sheep, my coins, my fate, my feelings, my well-being, my best chance."

As a Pharisee or scribe I would be ashamed to admit that, since I ought to be a shepherd of God's people, I am guilty of writing off people because of what they do wrong. I don't want Jesus to welcome sinners, because I want Jesus to stay with us ninety-nine. I don't want Jesus to leave us nine coins on the counter and devote himself to the lost coin. I am "anti-Jesus." I don't care for the lost the way Jesus does.

But then, listening to Jesus and feeling ashamed about my true answers to his hypotheticals, I could go back over the stories and hear the gospel.

Although the law says that I, Pharisee or scribe, church-goer and generally nice person, do not love others as I ought and do not especially care for those who are least among us and am therefore "the lost one," the gospel is that even for me, who do not fulfill God's love as I ought, even for me, who do not reflect God by the way I live, God searches constantly. God is even now scouring the mountainside, sweeping the house, looking for me to return to God. So that God's people may be complete and whole. So that, loving one another and

caring for each other in our troubles, God's peace may fill the world.

What planet are we from anyway, that we do not fulfill the law of love, but grumble when God is good to the poor, the sick, the lame and the blind? We are from a planet where winners win and losers lose. We think people get what they deserve, winners take all, rich get richer and poor get poorer, let sleeping dogs lie, snooze and you lose, etc. Winners are meant to win, losers are just plain lost. That's the planet we're from. A planet that makes a mockery of justice and truth, in the interest of self-preservation. That's our planet, and it is not a pretty one. Call it planet earth.

But Jesus is from God, and God says "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways." Jesus is from God, and God is full of mercy, his delight is to save and redeem, and when God loses one of his sheep he gives his only begotten son to die so that the sheep might not perish but have eternal life. God is a planet unto himself. If you want to know the truth, this is actually God's planet in the first place.

In Jesus Christ, through those who believe in him have been restored to the kingdom. We have been found by the searching shepherd or the sweeping woman, and God is pleased to have us back where we belong. In token of this, and so that we can remember that his name is mercy and abundance, God has given us a feast to eat. We will eat this feast today with billions of others. Nobody had better assert that anyone else is unworthy to eat today with Jesus, or they will be sent back to Luke 15! We do not commune only with Lutherans. We commune with whoever Jesus has invited, and it's a motley crew. We're pretty motley ourselves!

What planet is Jesus from? Well, he was from God but he has planted on this planet of ours a flag for the kingdom of God, so it looks like Jesus is not only from God but also from here.

Now the question is: What planet are you from? Let our answer to anyone who asks be something like this:

“Well, on our planet, when people have lost the peace of God, those who have received the peace of God extend it to them.” Amen.

