

Third Sunday after Trinity

I Peter 5: 6-11

Luke 15: 1-10

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

I have become a fan of several cartoons over the decades. Things like Peanuts, Calvin and Hobbes, and Bloom County carry not only humor, but also at times insightful theological and human messages. A number of years ago there was an artist by the name of Gary Larsen who plied his abilities at drawing and humor by creating cartoons which came to be published under the title, “The Far Side”. Generally, they were only one or two frames in length using the figures of animals to deliver a completely unanticipated punch line. You might find something like, “I am so miserable being alone here today; it’s almost like having you with me”. One memorable episode in the daily newspaper shows two deer standing side by side carrying on conversation with one reaching out to put a paw on the shoulder of the other. The first deer looks quite normal, but the second is looking out at the viewer and squarely on his chest is a set of red concentric circles with a bull’s eye in the center. The first deer, no doubt thinking about the impending hunting season, sympathetically says. “Gee Hal, that is an unfortunate birthmark!”

In a comic strip the irony of that comes off as pretty funny. But we have all known people who bear visible ‘birthmarks’ which are a burden to carry leaving them feeling singled out, and which impact their sense of self-worth often leading to isolation and distance from acceptance. And far more frequent are those, perhaps including some of us, who bear hidden blemishes in heart and soul, in relationships with others, ourselves, and God, which leave the bearer hurting, alienated, and lost. It is amazingly true that so many people yearn for and love the idea of grace, of being loved unconditionally, but who at the same time feel it is for others never quite extending to them. It is the experience of sitting on the outside looking longingly to belong, but, believing that some secret burden prevents it and so joy eludes them and us. This is nothing less than the power of sin to deceive us about our true worth before God and each other.

In the Gospel today Jesus tells a set of parables which are intertwined—the lost coin and the lost sheep. They are about both the pain of human wandering and lost-ness, and the God we worship, who chooses to place a value on us that runs contrary to all normal ways in our world. But that should be of no surprise to us for if God acts in the ways our world would act, then our lost condition would be simply written off as ‘collateral damage’. This is exactly what Jesus is challenging in these stories and we need to hear clearly his words.

These parables are set in Luke’s Gospel very intentionally. On the one hand they set the stage for the telling of the Prodigal Son, but on the other they are a response to the Pharisees and a very prevalent way of thinking about religious life and community. The charge is brought against Jesus that “he receives sinners and eats with them”. This phrase is not happenstance. The language is technical in that it refers to a crossing of the norms and boundaries of the faith and practice of the time. The word ‘receives’ does not denote a benign social interaction, but, indicates that Jesus is the host who not only sits with an unsavory lot of folks, but breaks bread with them. That is, he gives them a place at the table—a place in his life. Their secret sins and brokenness no longer leave them on the outside with God. The Pharisees are horrified because this is a breach of Mosaic Law. These are people who would have been excluded from synagogue worship and who violated social norms thus threatening the stability of the community. How might we say it today? “Birds of a feather flock together”? And we do have reason to be concerned about the moral conduct of each other for it impacts the whole. It is interesting and a bit frightening to get on internet sites

these days and see the individualized sense of moral judgement present. Each person seems to have a clear view of what is morally acceptable in others and is also quite sure that no one else measures up to their standards. (We would do well to heed Carl Jung's observation that all conflict originates within the individual, and the part with which we are not comfortable gets projected on others and lived out external to us.) Jesus is not suggesting personal morality or the concerns of the Pharisees is unimportant; He is saying God's transforming love is LARGER than our sin, and more expansive than the boundaries we create, and it changes us.

Make no mistake; these are people with blemishes. The narrative about the woman who lost a coin is not entirely clear. She may have simply misplaced it, but the loss has enormous consequences. In the near Middle East when a woman married she was given a head dress with 10 coins attached. If she breached her marriage then a coin was removed so that each time she wore it her failure would be there for all to see. How is that for a birthmark? The finding and replacement of it restored her dignity. No wonder there was joy present!!

The challenge of these parables is directed to a point of view and set of practices which would suggest that human sin and foolishness; our sin and foolishness are greater than the love of God. The God who has tracked His people across centuries, stood by them in the most desperate of situations, given them the freedom to fail and wander, chastised them for the sake of renewal, and finally took the ultimate step of engaging, living among, and suffering at the very hands of those He refuses to leave in the clutches of sin and death.

I Peter suggests that our adversary, the evil one, prowls around (meaning he is sneaky) seeking to devour us. That poetic language suggests that we can be consumed or have our energies and our lives taken over by deception. The great deception here is being led away from throwing ourselves on God's care. (What does the text say—Cast ALL your care on God, For God cares for you) Notice the juxtaposition of the word care. Ours "cares" can be our anxiety and fears that we can never be enough, but God's care is the providence and grace to love us anyway. There is a sort of arrogance, a form of pride, in coming to believe that our sins, our failures, our blemishes are too much for God to forgive and heal, so Peter calls us to be a bit more humble.

Jesus' parables may seem a bit absurd. After all who would risk 99 sheep to go after the one who has wandered off foolishly? Isn't that risky behavior or least a bad business practice, especially when the one has gotten itself into this mess? But that kind of thinking misjudges God and the joy God takes in us. If we are left out in the cold then healing cannot occur, repentance or new life cannot be found, and belonging is just a distant dream. That is not God's nature which is why these parables bring us Good News.

In an article in In "Context" magazine, Mary Marty retells a parable from the "Eye of the Needle" newsletter: A holy man was engaged in his morning meditation under a tree whose roots stretched out over the riverbank. During his meditation he noticed that the river was rising, and a scorpion caught in the roots was about to drown. He crawled out on the roots and reached down to free the scorpion, but every time he did so, the scorpion struck back at him. An observer came along and said to the holy man, "Don't you know that's a scorpion, and it's in the nature of a scorpion to want to sting?" To which the holy man replied, "That may well be, but it is my nature to save, and must I change my nature because the scorpion does not change its nature?" God's nature is to seek out the lost regardless of our birthmarks, our dark secrets, our sin. God will be true to the nature which Jesus embodies for us. And that should create joy in our hearts as it does for God. Amen+