

Third Sunday after Trinity

I Peter 5: 6-11

Luke 15: 1-10

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

I have become a fan of several cartoons over the decades. Things like Peanuts and Calvin and Hobbes carry not only humor, but also at times insightful messages, theological and human. 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. There is a baby rattlesnake whose head is vibrating instead of the tail, while the mother says to the father, “This never happened on my side of the family!” Another 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 is elusive. 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 lostness, and both are about the God we worship, who chooses to place a value on us that runs contrary to all the regular ways in our world. 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’, or part of the cost of progress. This is exactly what Jesus is challenging in these stories, and we need to clearly hear 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—an actual 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 that personal morality or the concern 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. Love, when received, (there’s that word again) 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 aimed at 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. What kind of God is it that is the subject here? It is 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 the capital sin-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 exercise a bit more humility.

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.

Garret Keizer in his Watchers in the Night records the following story. “During the course of earning her master’s degree, a woman found it necessary to commute several times a week from Victory, Vermont to the state university in Burlington, a good hundred miles away. Coming home late at

night, she would see an old man sitting by the side of her road. He was always there, in sub-zero temperatures, in stormy weather, no matter how late she returned. He made no acknowledgment of her passing. The snow settled on his cap and shoulders as if he were merely another gnarled old tree. She often wondered what brought him to that same spot every evening. Perhaps it was a stubborn habit, private grief or a mental disorder.

Finally, she asked a neighbor of hers, "Have you ever seen an old man who sits by the road late at night?" "Oh, yes," said her neighbor, "many times." "Is he a little touched upstairs? Does he ever go home?" The neighbor laughed and said, "He's no more touched than you or me. And he goes home right after you do. You see, he doesn't like the idea of you driving by yourself out late all alone on these back roads, so every night he walks out to wait for you. When he sees your taillights disappear around the bend, and he knows you're okay, he goes home to bed."

God seeks us whether well or ill, focused or confused, whole or broken, grounded or wandering lost in conditions of our own making, not because of our efforts but because it is his nature. The Collect from Trinity 15—"Keep, we beseech thee, O Lord, thy Church with thy perpetual mercy; and because the frailty of man without thee cannot but fall, keep us ever by thy help from all things hurtful, and lead us to all things profitable for our salvation." Amen+