

Invited to Rejoice

Wayne Waibel – 09/11/2022

Today's Gospel is about many things. At first glance it appears to be about repentance, but it really is about so much more. The real focus has more to do with the act of celebration. Even if we lock on to the masculinity of the first parable and the femininity of the second – still, everything points back to a form of celebration.

What kicks this lesson off is the Pharisees and scribes grumbling about how Jesus can not only get so close to tax collectors and sinners, but actually sit down and break bread with these folks.

The church elites are not slinging accusations or protesting in a disruptive way – they're grumbling. Much like the children of Israel grumbled to Aaron and Moses. The main difference being – Aaron fashioned a calf for the Israelites to worship to settle them down, where Jesus challenges His detractors with a couple of parables.

This comes as no surprise to us as we are accustomed to a reformed way of thinking. There are times when I feel compelled to thank you for the open minds you reverently maintain when it comes to your tolerance of what comes out of my mouth at the pulpit.

Your magnanimous gesture is not lost on me. I know there exists a segment of parishioners that will place a call to the police if a communion wafer is broken into pieces by a worshiper so that they may share the Eucharist with a member of society that is denied a place at the communion table by virtue of their orientation.

Sometimes, people refuse to change course because they fundamentally do not understand that they need to change. Thank you for not belonging to that surprisingly large fraternity.

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In order to be found, one must first be lost. The reference is repeated throughout Luke 15:1-10. The sheep is lost – the coin is lost. To be lost is a most distressing feeling – it may even become harrowing.

In the case of sheep, they are timid creatures. Upon realizing their predicament, they would curl up and hide knowing that they are defenseless. So they are beyond lost – they are no more visible than a small coin on a dimly lit floor. In both cases – they need to be found. Neither is going to cry out, “Here I am!”

Jeremiah is probably very familiar with the bleakness of being lost. His life is made up of pain without companionship, and with no assurance that things will get better.

When you speak truth to power – your life is pretty solitary. His message is a series of images and references that can be summarized as the repeal of creation. Not a very popular message.

The Pharisees represent the keepers of the rules. They delude themselves into believing their role to be one of keeping the law and all its associated articles free of corruption by unclean intrusion in whatever form – primarily the poor and the marginalized of society.

Make no mistake; they exist as much in the twenty-first century as the first. We just don't call them Pharisees anymore. They're not even clergy necessarily, though some most assuredly are!

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Paul's first letter to Timothy while speaking in terms of redemption through the love of Christ Jesus means nothing without what God said first in Jesus Christ. Even the worst of sinners can be redeemed and transformed by the love of Christ.

Twenty-first century Timothies – young ministers and the like – generally speaking – millenials – live in a pluralistic religious world where claims of exclusive paths to God cause strife or oppression at the very least and terrorism at the extreme.

Our problem isn't simply a matter of having the wrong beliefs, it's a matter of believing that right beliefs are what matters most. We get so wrapped up in doctrinal pursuits that we lose sight of the all-important meaning that lies behind and within the scriptures.

Take today's offering from the lectionary. We routinely assume that the parables are about finding that which is lost. Actually the reinforced point of these parables has more to do with the compassionate concern of a loving God and heaven's fervent delight over discovery, when one sinner, whether tax collector or Pharisee, comes to be found.

Even though the parables are for the benefit of all – we don't always allow for the repentance of the body of elites that as oppressors are generally dismissed as the bad guys. They can return to the fold just like any other sinner.

And what of the ninety-nine sheep? Who's taking care of them while the shepherd is off looking for the one who is lost? So many angles and perspectives!

We are once again challenged by our twenty-first century lens. We see so many different lessons within each parable that it becomes an extreme exercise just to arrive at a simple truth.

Religious insiders – which is what we may consider ourselves – are often more comfortable with saving the lost than welcoming those we perceive to be lost. Saving is about power; welcoming is about intimacy.

And the issue of the two parables is not to call sinners to repentance (neither a sheep nor a coin can repent), but to invite the righteous to join the celebration. Jesus not only emphasizes joy; He expects rejoicing.

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To be found is one of the greatest relief's one can experience, and to be lost can be one of the most frightening. It is into this dynamic that Jesus speaks to the grumblings of the Pharisees and the scribes. He knows why they are so intolerant of the perceived undesirables in His midst. It is upsetting to the status quo.

And Jesus is so loving in His parables. He does not beat them over the head with hyperbole – no – instead He uses as reference the single most undesirable vocation of all in first century Palestine – a shepherd – to drive home His invitation to celebrate. The good news in these simple illustrations is that all are invited to rejoice with the heavenly host over lost souls found.

Paul reminds Timothy specifically, but all listeners in general of the vastness of the love of Almighty God personified in His beloved Son. So much so that he holds himself out as an example of the worst of sinners in defining the depths of God's grace.

And the truly remarkable understanding in all this is that it is a gift from God. It can't be won – it isn't even necessarily earned. It is freely given simply out of love.

This is a far cry from the God of Jeremiah who was about to deliver what was left of the children of Israel into the hands of the Babylonians. They were simply unable or unwilling to abide by the Mosaic Law. Their interpretations had led them to do evil, leaving God with no choice but to bring about a new covenant which would be written on their hearts rather than stone tablets.

In much the same way Jesus reaches deep into our inmost thoughts and prepares us to join Him in the heavenly rejoicing over one sinner who has found their way to salvation.

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We have lost kids at the library all the time and the result is almost always the same. The child is understandably upset and only settles down once the parent is located.

The parent is never very upset because they were usually on their way to the kid, or could see the child even if the child felt they were lost. If, however, a parent comes up unable to locate a child - we go into an all-hands-on-deck, total focus on blocking the exits and finding that lost child – period.

In that situation the result is completely different. Usually the kid is unaware they're lost and when they are reunited with their parent – they are showered with affection. Clearly – there is great rejoicing over a lost child found – as there should be.

So, too, it is in heaven when a lost soul is redeemed. And that is the true purpose behind Jesus' parables. It is far too easy for us to lose sight of the rejoicing. We get so wrapped up in the minutia of life that we completely overlook some of the things that should be far more important to us.

Salvation consists not purely – or even primarily in rescue, but in being drawn into the eternal celebration. Amen.