Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“The Righteous”* Luke 15:1-14

In today’s passage, Jesus’ parables almost overshadow the very thing that inspired him to tell them. As the passage from begins, Luke tells us that tax collectors and “sinners,” both groups of people have heard something new and hopeful in Jesus’ words, and have begun to gather close to listen. Even knowing that they were looked down upon by “respectable” people, the tax collectors and other sinners dared to come closer to hear Jesus speak. It happens so fast, and is followed by the two parables, that we almost miss that part of the reading.

And that is too bad, because these two groups of people must have been very hungry for Jesus’ words of welcome and caring. No one likes to be shunned or rejected—even by strangers. Jesus, however, seemed to be saying something new. He seemed to be different than the other teachers like the Pharisees and the other religious officials. So, these two groups of societal low-lifes took a chance and ventured closer, over-coming their fear of rejection.

Sure enough, Jesus does *not* turn them away. Although Luke does not describe it for us, apparently Jesus looks kindly on them, perhaps even gesturing for them to come closer. We know this because, predictably, the religious officials become offended, saying, *‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’* [1c]

The religious officials, the Pharisees and scribes, were shocked and scandalized because they had no respect for tax collectors who were collaborators with the Roman Empire that occupied their land. They had even less regard for the disreputable “other sinners” who broke not only moral laws but also the laws of ritual purity. Such people were to be avoided, even spurned—and in no uncertain terms. Such people were the ultimate outsiders because they were thought to be willfully unredeemable.

How is it that Jesus welcomed them?

Most of the time, when we read it, or hear this passage read in church, we listen with a knowing, but also a sarcastic kind of sympathy, for the poor misguided Pharisees and scribes who are about to have their own sin pointed out to them—the sin of self-righteousness.

We celebrate that we are not like them. We are *glad* to know and worship a God who we are told will come looking for every last, lost sheep.

We are relieved to believe in the God who will open every door, search under every piece of furniture, the God who will shine a bright light into every closet and cupboard, every hidden place to find every last one of us—us, as in you and me and most of the people we know—you know, nice people like us who only have (comparatively) *little* sins on our consciences.

I believe the Pharisees and the scribes would also have been glad to hear Jesus’ parables if he would have assured them that the “lost people” he was looking for were the ones who were more like them. The ones who only sinned “a little bit”—*nice* people like them. The ones who only made “little” mistakes, committed *little* sins that were easily washed clean with a few prayers, maybe submersion in one of the ritual baths, or an extra sin-offering—an animal delivered to the Temple for sacrifice.

If Jesus could have convinced the Pharisees and scribes that the only people who would receive his notice and his friendliness we *little* sinners, the already redeemed, then they probably would not have been so hard on him. They probably would have welcomed his message: *I have come to proclaim the good news to* some *people.*

Instead, Jesus not only welcomed the “nice people” in society, he also made a place beside him for the “big” sinners, and the unredeemed: The ones who lived on the edges of society; The ones who could not or did not know how to come back on their own; The ones who had not yet found a reason to want to come back into the society.

Indeed, it is for their sake that Jesus told these stories, but also for the others. He also told these stories for “the righteous,” for the society of Pharisees, scribes, and other “good” people who decided there were others *beyond* reclamation, beyond saving. It is, perhaps *especially* for them that Jesus told these two stories of two seekers who go to extremes to find the *one* lost sheep, the *one* lost coin.

It was especially for those who would have waited with the other ninety-nine sheep who had *not* wandered off—the *good* sheep—that Jesus tells the story of the shepherd who leaves them and searches high-and-low for the lost one.

It was for the ones who would have shrugged and thought to themselves, “it will turn up,” that Jesus tells the story of a woman who is so determined that she lights a lamp, and sweeps again and again, the entire house, until she has that one lost coin back in her hand. Jesus told these stories for the ones who would have thought to themselves: “small loss.” For Jesus, there are no small losses.

So, instead of rejecting them, Jesus made a place beside himself for those whom the many others, the majority of society, considered lost. His stories were an assurance that they were being sought, and that God found them valuable and wanted them to leave the past behind, and come close. He told them two stories of the God who will go to extremes to find them and help them come back, the God who will rejoice over them.

As you and I hear these stories, we cannot help but be glad of what we hear. We are not like the Pharisees and scribes Luke tells us about. We find it is good and reassuring to believe in a God who will go to such lengths for any one of us…until we think of someone whom we believe is irredeemable.

The headlines are full of such people every day. For example, do you remember what you thought and felt when you heard that Charles Manson had died? Most of us can call to mind quite a few others—dead and still living—whom we would find it hard to think of as one of the people God would go looking for so faithfully and with such commitment.

Indeed, it need not be a criminal of the magnitude of someone like Manson. In fact, it brings to mind something that a prison guard said to me in the country jail in Martinez, California, where I did a year of ministry. I, and a couple of other students, were volunteer chaplains. We would hold Bible Study with groups of men and visit with the few women who were also being held there.

One day, one of the guards was signing me out, and getting ready to electronically open a series of heavy, iron doors that separated us from the outside world of freedom. As we stood there together, he looked up from his paperwork and said to me, “You know, I think it’s nice that you and the others come here to keep these people company. It’s nice that you pray with them and all, but you know what?

When these jokers get out of here, do you know who will be waiting to welcome them back? It won’t be nice church people, like you. It’ll be their drug suppliers, their pimps, or the people they used to do crimes with.”

I remember that story and think of not only how true it is, but also how hard such a reality is for all of us. Yet, if the stories Jesus told tell us anything at all, they tell us that we are called upon to care about what God cares about. We are called upon to care about the same people God cares for, and to seek them.

This is one of the things we need to remember about God’s holy Words and Ways: they bring us *difficult* news along with God’s *good* news. They come as a set: we always get the one with the other.

Our job becomes the on-going discernment of how to receive God’s difficult news. The part that calls us to care for others—even the ones “the righteous” people among us shun and avoid.

So, how can we become seekers? The difficult news is that whatever we do, it will require that we stretch ourselves beyond what we know, and what we are currently comfortable with.

The good news is that there is still so much we can do *in our present context*. There is still so much we *are* doing that I hope we all take the time to rejoice over, right now.

Rejoice over the families that have a safe place to live here with us while they build-up their reserves and resources to become more independent. And pray that they will remember and give thanks for the God who sought them through Family Promise.

Rejoice over the many school children who are carrying backpacks and using brand new school supplies because of the generosity of so many here in this Sanctuary. And pray that they will come to know the God who loves them, sought them, *saw* them, and sent them what they needed though us.

Rejoice and give thanks for the prayers that are even now being sent up to God from this congregation for the survivors of gun violence, *and* for the ones who have committed it.

And do not give in to helplessness or despair when you hear of yet another shooting. Instead, give thanks that your heart, and others’ hearts are being changed by the prayers we offer to God, and the way God’s word assures us that God is an extreme seeker who will not stop looking with *us* for ways in which we can heal the suffering we all see and experience.

Give thanks for the God who is even now putting lanterns into our hands and opening cupboards and closets, and even rooms that we had forgotten were there that we might look and find that which has been lost. Together, with God, we are being coaxed and strengthened to seek *and find* the answers we need—even to such the deeply tragic problem like gun violence.

Rather than self-righteously sit-out the suffering and sadness we see all around us, God is calling on us to search high-and-low *with* God the good shepherd, *with* God the determined housewife. We are called upon to find *our* unique place in the broad mosaic that must come together to heal and reconcile. We are to seek that place and those people God brings to us, and we are to welcome them in God’s name.

And when or if we begin to feel overwhelmed, if we begin to feel despair over the immensity of the suffering we see around us, we are to come back to these stories and remember—with gladness—that God is a relentless seeker who is looking for us, even now. So rejoice and give thanks.

Amen.