



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Trinity

St. Luke 15:1-11

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There's something about sharing a meal that communicates fellowship. And so Jesus liked to eat with people. The Jews looked forward to a great banquet at the Lord's table at the end of the age, a banquet that celebrated God's having set the world to rights, and so it makes sense that Jesus would eat with people. In him, God was once again with his people. In Jesus, God was inaugurating that new world that everyone had hoped for. Jesus was acting out the great banquet that Israel had always hoped for when the Lord would return to his people. The problem for a lot of people was that Jesus was inviting and eating with the wrong people. Look again at Luke 15:1-2.

**Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."**

It was bad enough that Jesus accepted invitations from tax collectors and sinners, but now Luke tells us that Jesus was becoming known for hosting his own banquets and actually, deliberately choosing to invite these sorts of people. As far as the Pharisees were concerned, if Jesus was the Messiah, he was doing it all very wrong.

Tax collectors have always been unpopular people, but to the Jews they represented everything that was wrong with the world. They represented the Romans and the corrupt Herodians. They were a constant reminder that,

despite being in their own land, the Jews were essentially still in exile. And "sinners". For the Pharisees that was pretty much anyone who wasn't a Pharisee, from the really bad sinners, like prostitutes, down to the ordinary people who were simply too poor or illiterate to practise the sort of holiness the Pharisees did.

When we talk about the Pharisees it's important to remember what they were about. Jews understood heaven and earth to be two halves of God's Creation. They were meant to be together, to overlap with God and his people living together. That's how Creation began. Think of the Garden of Eden where God and the people he created lived together. But human rebellion and sin separated heaven and earth. Sinful human beings were cast out of the presence of God because unholiness cannot survive the presence of the holy. But there was one place left where heaven and earth still overlapped. That was the temple. It took preparation and sacrifices and priests acting as mediators, but in the temple sin could be overcome for just a little while and humans could enter the presence of God—in the temple you could get a glimpse of the holy. The Pharisees and Jesus would have both agreed that if you want to understand how things should be on earth, you had to start by figuring out how things were in heaven. This is the point of Jesus' prayer for God's kingdom to come on earth as in heaven. So the Pharisees looked to the temple—that was the closest you could get to heaven—and being in the temple required absolute purity on the part of the priests. The Pharisees weren't priests—at least not most of them—but they chose to get as close to heaven as they thought they could by doing their best to live like the priests in the temple and being as pure as they could possibly be. Rich people could afford to live that way. Most ordinary people could not and so the Pharisees looked down on them as "sinners".

And yet here's Jesus claiming to be the Messiah and claiming to be inaugurating God's kingdom—and that means acting out here on earth the things that are going on in heaven—but instead of living like the Pharisees and steering clear of sinners and unclean people, Jesus is actually seeking them out and sharing with them this heavenly symbol of the banquet. Jesus is bringing heaven and earth back together. Everything about what he's doing shouts "Messiah!", but the Pharisees are furious because the great heavenly banquet is supposed to be for the righteous, not the unrighteous. It's supposed to be centred around the temple, but Jesus is centring it around himself. Anyone who will come to Jesus is welcome. All of this is like a stick in the eye of the Pharisees.

Jesus responds with three parables and our Gospel includes the first two. Look at verses 3-6:

**So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'"**

Notice that this whole passage is one long question that Jesus puts to the Pharisees: "Which of you having lost a sheep wouldn't do all these things and then celebrate when you've found the animal?"

Shepherds weren't their kind of people, but they could identify with the story. A flock of a hundred sheep was about average. This wasn't a rich man, but he wasn't poor either. In the morning he would lead his sheep to pasture and at the end of the day he'd lead them back to the sheepfold and count them as they went through the gate. This night he notices that one is

missing. He's still got ninety-nine, but that one missing sheep was still valuable. He couldn't afford to write it off. And so he leaves the ninety-nine with the other shepherds and goes off into the night to find the lost one. Everyone could imagine this shepherd hunting high and low in the dark for the sheep, worrying not just about the possibility of wild animals eating the sheep, but eating him too. The chances of finding it, let alone finding it alive were probably fairly slim. But the man finally finds it. Sheep are natural herd animals, so when they wander off and get separated from the flock they get frightened and shut down. Jesus describes the man doing what any shepherd would do: picking up the frightened sheep and carrying it across his shoulders, back to the sheepfold. He and his sheep return safe and sound. And so he invites his fellow shepherds to celebrate with him. The sheep that was lost has been found! Jesus is asking the Pharisees: If this happened to you, wouldn't you celebrate? And the obvious answer is that, yes, they would. We all would.

Skipping now to verses 8-9 Jesus tells them a second parable. This time it's not one of ninety-nine that's lost; it's one of ten. (In the third parable it's one of two.)

**“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And 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.’”**

The man with the flock of one hundred sheep was reasonably well off. In contrast, the woman Jesus describes now is destitute. The coins would probably have been part of her dowry—maybe all there was to her dowry—and made into a headdress. Headdresses with hundreds of coins were and are common, so we get a sense how poor this woman is in that

her dowry consisted of a mere ten silver coins. We can imagine her on this day taking out her precious headdress and putting it on, maybe remembering her wedding day long ago. And as she puts it away she notices that one of the ten little coins is missing. She panics, looks around, but she can't find it. The sort of little mud-brick house someone like her would have lived in had a small door and maybe a tiny window. The house would have been dark. She lights her little oil lamp, but even that doesn't do very much for her, so she starts sweeping the floor with palm fronds, hoping to hear the coin scrape on the floor or, if all else fails, to sweep it up.<sup>1</sup> Anyone can identify with this scene. I've done this myself. You know I collect old lanterns. They've got all sorts of screws in odd sizes and with weird thread pitches. As I've discovered, you can't just go to the hardware store and buy a new one if you lose it. I've dropped screws plenty of times, swept the floor, and found myself sifting through the dustpan with a magnet. So this image of the old woman hunting for her lost coin is one the Pharisees could easily identify with and Jesus is asking them: “If this happened to you and after all the panic and after all the searching and sweeping you finally found the coin, would you not call your friends to tell them the good news and to celebrate?” Of course they would.

The answer to both of Jesus' questions is “yes”. In fact, even two thousand years distant from the shepherd or the poor woman, we can sense their loss and we can celebrate with them as Jesus describes their joy. The Pharisees were no different. Jesus may even have got them thinking of

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<sup>1</sup> For background details for both parables see Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1972), pp. 132-135 and Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Baker Academic, 1998), pp. 782-785.

some time they lost something of their own and then found it and were joyful. And what Jesus is saying is that these tax collectors and sinners are precious to him—and not only to him, but to all of heaven and to the Lord himself. In verse 7, at the end of the first parable, as the shepherd celebrates with his friends, Jesus says to the Pharisees:

**“Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”**

And in verse 10 as the woman celebrates her found coin he says:

**“Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”**

Jesus profoundly shames the self-righteousness of the Pharisees. He has a remarkable way of telling stories that cut right to the heart of things. Their idea of “on earth as it is in heaven” meant condemning sinners and the unclean and consigning them to God's judgement. But Jesus is saying, if you want to see what's going on in heaven stop looking to the temple. That worked in the past, but in Jesus God is doing something new. This is part of the reason why Jesus was forgiving sins and declaring people clean. He was acting out and showing people how *he* is the new temple. In him heaven and earth have come together. In Jesus we have the firstfruits and a foretaste of God's redemption and his new creation. And in these parables Jesus is telling the Pharisees, if you want to manifest on earth what is happening in heaven, look at what I am doing, not at the old temple. And in Jesus and in his banquets with tax collectors and sinners we see that God truly loves sinners and that he's sent Jesus not to condemn us in our sin, but to rescue us and to lead us back to him in repentance and faith. We're reminded here of Jesus' words in John 3:16-17:

**“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”**

You see, the Pharisees were anticipating the end of the age and they were ready for God to send his Son into the world to condemn sinners. The Pharisees were *partly* right. They were right to look forward to a day of coming judgement when God’s Son would come to condemn sinners and to vindicate the righteous. What they got wrong was that it never occurred to them that God would send his Son, not just at the end of history, but would first send him into the middle of history, to call sinners to repentance and to offer himself as a sacrifice for their sins. Jesus stepped into the middle of history to redeem sinners so that when he returns at the end of history we won’t be condemned. In this we see the love of God. He didn’t cast humanity from his presence with a “A good riddance!” We sundered heaven and earth and when we did, God set in motion a plan to bring us back together.

This was the plan from the beginning. Through Abraham God had called Israel to be a light to the nations, to be his means of rescuing them from the darkness, but instead Israel had done the opposite—just like the Pharisees. And over and over the Lord had rebuked his people for failing in their mission. Jesus’ parable of the lost sheep has strong echoes of Ezekiel 34. There the Lord says:

**Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The**

**weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.”**

The very ones who were supposed to care for the sheep have taken advantage of them and abandoned them. But, says the Lord:

**I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out...and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness...I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.”** (Ezekiel 34:2b-6, 11, 12b, 14-16)

The Sadducees, the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, were corrupt sell-outs who enriched themselves, getting fat at the expense of the sheep, like the leaders in Ezekiel’s day. The Pharisees opposed them and called for reform, but they didn’t have it right either. Their solution was to condemn the lost sheep. Sure, they’d show them by example—at a distance—how they ought to live. But they didn’t seek them out. They didn’t really call

them back to the Lord—not in any meaningful way. And so the condemnation that the Lord gave through Ezekiel now falls on the Pharisees.

**Thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.**

In Jesus, Ezekiel’s prophecy has been fulfilled. He is the Son of David come to seek and to save the lost, to shepherd the sheep, and to feed them in the rich pasture of his kingdom. He’s given himself as a sacrifice for our sins and this morning he invites us to his Table to his heavenly banquet. But how do we come? Again, this is the meal Jesus gave us to make sense of the cross. He is the Passover lamb sacrificed for our sins. By his death he frees us from our bondage to sin and death and leads us into new life and new creation. In Jesus we see grace. We don’t deserve any of this. We’re the rebels; we’re the sinners; we’re the God-haters. We deserve nothing but death, but in his grace Jesus offers us forgiveness and restoration and life. And when we take hold of his grace in faith he tells us that the whole heavenly court rejoices. What was lost has been found. What ran away has been restored.

But we’re always at risk of forgetting that we come to the banquet only by grace. It’s interesting that in the gnostic pseudo-gospel of Thomas, the parable was changed. In that telling of the story, the shepherd explains to the lost sheep that he sought it out because he loved it and he valued it more than

the others.<sup>2</sup> We're prone to twisting the story the same way in our own minds—thinking that we've been invited here to the Table because we deserved to be here. But that's not the story Jesus tells. The one sheep that was lost was no more valuable than the other ninety-nine. The one coin lost was no different than all the others. In fact, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, which follows them, the son who was lost was an utter twit and many people justly wonder why his father didn't simply disown him. The only difference between the one and the ninety-nine and the one and the ten is that the one was lost. Brothers and sisters, we are not here because we've earned God's love. We're here by his grace. We are here because he rejoices in redeeming sinners. We're here because it pleases him to forgive his enemies and restore them to his fellowship.

Jesus upset the Pharisees because he made manifest on earth the reality of heaven that they had forgotten. He revealed that the Lord is a God who loves his enemies and desires to save them. We pray the words from Jesus' prayer: "on earth as in heaven". But do we live out the reality of heaven in our lives by reaching out to sinners with the love and grace and joy of heaven? It's easy to fall into self-righteousness and it's easy to live with an attitude of condemnation. Brothers and Sisters, remember this morning that we come to the Lord's Table because of his love and grace. We come as sinners forgiven. When you go, don't leave all of this at the door of the church, but take it with you so that you can encounter the world with grace and with the same love that God has shown you in Jesus.

Let us pray: Loving and gracious Father, help us to grasp your deep, deep love for sinners and the profound graciousness of grace. Remind us of the joy in your courts over sinners who were lost and now found. And,

Father, help us to love our fellow sinners as you have loved us and show us ways in which we can make the reality of heavenly known here on earth. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Gospel of Thomas 107.