

1Timothy 4: 1-11
Luke 15: 1-10
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
September 15, 2013

A parable is a story that is literally “laid along side of” a situation or teaching. Jesus does not as a rule explain the one true meaning of a given parable. Instead he allows his hearers to struggle with the relationship between the stories and the given situation and find their own meanings. Jesus is always more interested in you and me finding meanings for ourselves than dictating to us what we shall believe and how we shall believe it. Parables challenge us to have our own journey.

As with all parables the situation which provokes Jesus’ stories is as important as the stories themselves. In this case Jesus is surrounded by tax collectors and sinners, apparently sharing food and drink with them. The religious leaders of the day are appalled. It is expressly forbidden to socialize with sinners. The Law of Moses separates out sinners not simply because they have offended the Law, but also in the hope that separation from the community will awaken a desire to repent and be restored to the covenant.

The Pharisees and scribes believe God has separated sinners from the community in order that they might be redeemed. By associating with them Jesus is lowering the standards. He is communicating that God loves everybody regardless of their sin and therefore undermining the authority of the Law of Moses. For years Christian liberals and conservatives have accused each other of just this fault. For conservatives it is liberals who adopt a laxity of biblical standards regarding individual moral behavior. Liberals accuse conservatives of focusing on personal behavior while turning a blind eye to biblical standards of social justice, the sin not

of individuals alone but of nations and communities and economic systems. In fact they are both right. Unfortunately, all too often the debate on these issues reflects less a faithful reflection on biblical ethics than political ideologies. Hence one side sees no contradiction between God's will and American economic and military power, while another employs a moral relativism under the heading of "inclusiveness". What is a poor American Christian to do?

Any time we take scripture out of its setting in the Bible and turn it into a series of laws and moral codes we invite trouble. Why? Because once we have done this we have lost a great deal of the intended meaning of the verse. Further, the given verse becomes an extension of whatever worldly belief we already have. We then seek scriptures which agree with our beliefs.

This is why I appreciate the approach of Jesus in employing parables. He does not tell us what they mean. Rather, by laying a situation side by side with a story he invites us to make our own associations. A social setting where Jesus is eating and drinking with "sinners" and feeling the righteous judgment of religious leaders is put alongside two stories: one about a lost sheep and one about a lost coin.

What do we learn when we allow the situation and the parables to interpret each other? Let me make some associations.

First of all where am I in the encounter that prompts the parables? Most of the time I am one of the sinners "included" in Jesus' presence. After all Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. I am a sinner. It must be ok for me to be with Jesus. Doesn't Paul in his letter to Timothy call himself the chief of sinners?

And yet, what is my aim in being with Jesus? Is it to be "included"? Is it to feel better about my conflicted and not 100% honorable life? More to the point—and this is a question

that came to me as I wrote this sermon—what is Jesus' purpose in being with me and my fellow sinners? Is he looking to be one of the guys? Is he eating with me and my friends simply to make a statement to the scribes and Pharisees to show them up for the narrow rigid hypocritical moralists they are?

Asking these questions makes me think that the scribes and Pharisees actually are people whose presence is necessary for there to be substance to the parables which follow. So often these spiritual leaders are portrayed as one dimensional stick figures. Their stiff self righteousness serves to highlight the warm and generous love of Jesus. But it seems to me that their criticism raises an important and critical question: Why does Jesus meet with and socialize with tax collectors and sinners? Indeed, why are they drawn to him?

When I articulate the question this way I find myself standing with the people I have been brought up to distrust and dismiss. Like the bible experts and the religious leaders I am suspicious of expressions of faith whose aim is to include people in order to make them feel better about themselves. I want to know how this welcoming everybody is consistent with the idea that there is something radically wrong in the world and in human nature which God has sent Jesus to make right. How can being part of an inclusive community help an addict if it does not present the hope of being free from his or her addiction? How does including someone who is deeply depressed and hopeless help the person if it does not offer the trust that God's love in Jesus Christ can lead them to ground on which they can stand? For that matter, how does including someone who is wealthy through ethically dubious practices help him to live with integrity if it does not proclaim the trust that living for wealth at the cost of one's soul is a sorry bargain?

Early in my ministry the only message I could offer was that God receives and accepts us in our suffering. One day a young medical student came to me and said how much she appreciated the fact that she was accepted with her battle with an eating disorder. She asked a question, “Will it get better?” I had no answer.

To all the questions raised by the encounter between Jesus and the religious leaders Jesus lays along side two stories. The first involves the shepherd who leaves the ninety –nine sheep to find the one lost one. The second presents a woman who has lost a valuable coin and who scours the house until she finds it.

Notice that there is no equivalent of the scribes and Pharisees. They have done their part in raising the issue. In what way are the two stories a response? Having identified with the religious leaders I am waiting to hear what Jesus has to say.

Do I notice that it is not important to the shepherd how or why the sheep got lost? It matters little to the woman how the coin was misplaced. For all we know the shepherd and the woman could be beating themselves up for being careless and being at least in part responsible for their precious belongings being lost in the first place. There is no blame for the rebelliousness of the sheep. The coin did not roll away on its own. There is no theological explanation—no speaking of God’s will that the lost be lost. Indeed the implication is that it is not God or anyone else’s will that the lost be lost. In fact the overwhelming emphasis of the stories is on the passionate and single minded urgency that the lost *be found! No effort is spared. Nothing is right until that which is lost is found and restored to the flock or to the rest of the coins.* There is even the uncomfortable implication that in the urgency of seeking the lost, those who are not lost are left to their own devices. Are the scribes and Pharisees meant to

overhear this and recognize that they are already among the ninety-nine of the not lost? Or are they actually lost and wishing Jesus would pay attention to them; but are unable to admit that they feel estranged from God and cannot find their way back to him?

Friends, this morning I am struck that Jesus doesn't make it easy for us with a simple answer to these deep and conflicted questions.

Yet I do take away this. If I am a sinner and live with the pain of being estranged from God I am hearing of a God who in Jesus Christ has left the security of heaven to come and find me. It doesn't matter that much. It doesn't matter how I became lost or why. The only thing that matters to the God of Jesus is *that* I am and that I know it and am crying for help. But I also know that admitting my need for help, acknowledging my estrangement from God is painful and difficult. But I do trust on the deepest level that God is always seeking me in my lost places. But this same God is not coming to me or you in order simply to put his arm around our shoulders and commiserate. He comes to redeem. He comes in the person of Jesus to take us by the hand and lift us up above our doubts and fears and the despair to which we have accommodated ourselves to give us *new life!* I believe this is why we seek Jesus to discover that he offers new life because he really means for us to have it. It is why he associates with people like us. To challenge us to receive the gift of a new life and to be a means by which he offers it to our neighbors. Amen.