

Righteous by Association

In the name of him who came to seek and to save the lost, dear friends in Christ: They can't believe what they're seeing. The Pharisees and Scribes keep hearing glowing reports about Jesus, the itinerate Rabbi from Galilee. They hear he's performing healing miracles on multitudes. They know he can preach a mean sermon. But look at the kind of people he hangs out with. He's attracting all the wrong sort – the very dregs of society: tax collectors and sinners. And yes, I know in some versions of the Bible they put quotation marks around the word sinners to indicate these are people who were only *called* sinners by overly judgmental others; but that misses the point completely. These really were sinners: pimps, prostitutes, pickpockets, petty thieves, and conmen. The tax collectors were seen as the worst of the bunch because by working for the hated Romans oppressors they were traitors to the Jewish nation and scoundrels who overcharged their countrymen to pad their own pocketbooks. No, no doubt about it; these were the sort of human trash that decent people properly avoid.

But this Jesus doesn't simply not avoid them; he goes out of his way to *welcome* them. The word used in the text means "to receive with the right hand". It carries the idea of honoring and blessing them. That's what Jesus is doing with these vile people. And that's not the worst of it. He actually dines with them. In that culture table fellowship was seen as a close form of friendship and intimacy. You typically ate only with family. If you invited someone else to your table, it was telling them that you considered them to be like a brother or sister to you.

The Pharisees and Scribes are horrified by this scandalous behavior of Jesus. "He calls himself a man of God; but look at the people he gathers around him. Doesn't he know that bad company corrupts good character? Has he never heard that birds of a feather flock together? That must be it. A man is known by the company he keeps. If this Jesus hangs out with sinners it must be because he is one." Thus using guilt by association, they dismiss and condemn Jesus, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

Apparently their comment was meant to be overheard. They want Jesus to know precisely what they think of him. And so Jesus directs his next words to them. It comes in the form of three parables, two of which we heard today: the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. The third is the parable of the prodigal son. And they really should be heard all three together, but since the prodigal son was one of the Gospel lessons back in Lent, it seems the folks who put together the lectionary thought you didn't need to hear it again. But you see there's a logical succession, kind of a build up: first it's one of a hundred that is lost, then one of ten, and finally one of two. There's also an increase in worth: first it's a sheep, then a valuable coin, and finally a human being – a son. By means of these three parables Jesus is asking his critics to see things differently. He invites them to stop seeing what he's doing in a worldly way and to consider his actions from a heavenly point of view.

Since they are today's text, we'll focus on the first two parables; but we don't want to forget that the third one is there and that it's the one that carries the biggest punch line, so I will refer to it later. We find three emphases in the first two parables. First is the helplessness of the thing that's lost. A lost sheep is a scared sheep. As animals go, they're not very bright; but they're smart enough to know they can't defend themselves. So what a sheep will do when it suddenly realizes that it's lost is to find a place to hide – maybe in a ravine under some brambles or thorny bushes where predators will find it hard to get at. It will also be very quiet

because it doesn't want to attract attention to itself. And there it will stay in its hidey-hole because it's too frightened to come out – even if it hears the voice of its shepherd calling for it. No lost sheep is going to find its own way home. It has to be found. Likewise it goes without saying that lost coins do not find themselves. They remain where they are hidden until someone finds them. The upshot is that lost sinners are equally helpless. They will not find their own way back to God. They must be found. That's what Jesus is doing in his ministry: seeking the lost.

That brings us to the second emphasis: the effort expended by the one searching for the thing that's lost. In the shepherd's case he's got his work cut out for him. When he does his headcount and discovers that one is missing, he's got to backtrack and check all the potential places a lost sheep might hide. It means crawling through all those ravines and brambles until he physically lays eyes on the sheep. It will do no good to call for it because the sheep won't answer. And when he does find it, he'll have to crawl in there and get it because it's too paralyzed with fear to come out even when it sees its shepherd. That's why he has to carry it home on his shoulders. It won't follow him – it's still too scared to move. I imagine you'd work up a pretty good sweat lugging home a sheep that weighs upwards of 100 pounds for who knows how many miles. So also the lost coin: the woman lights her lamp, sweeps the whole house from top to bottom, probably moves the furniture around, searching in every nook and cranny. She's relentless in her pursuit until she finds her lost coin.

Jesus is just as tireless in his pursuit of sinners. We know that often in his three years of ministry he found little time to eat or sleep. He kept a schedule that would put the worst workaholic to shame. More to the point, seeking and saving the lost would eventually take him to the cross where bloody, bruised, beaten, and nailed he would expend vast amounts of painful effort to atone for and expunge the sins of the world. For Jesus saving sinners took an infinite amount of hard work and he was glad to do it.

And that leads to the third emphasis, which is the joy expressed by the searchers when they find what was lost. Both the shepherd and the woman call their friends and neighbors to celebrate with them. Theirs is the sort of joy that needs to be shared. They want everyone they know to participate in it. And this, Jesus explains, is only a faint shadow of the outbursts of joy that resound in the company of saints and angels in heaven over one sinner who repents.

By means of these parables, Jesus is asking his critics to see through his eyes what's going on: Of course I'm reaching out to sinners. They can't reach out to me. They're helpless. And look: they're gathering around me hearing me speak God's Word. I'm calling them to repent for their sins, and they are. Why can't you see that this is good thing? It's not that I become guilty by associating with them. It's that they become righteous by association with me. On another level, Jesus is using these parables to call the Pharisees and Scribes to repent of their sins: namely their pride, their self-righteousness, and their bitter judgment and condemnation of others. If you are angry and resentful when sinners repent and heaven rejoices, what does that say about you? Whose side are you on? The answer is obvious. And it's not good.

This is where the final parable comes in to deliver the knockout blow. It's a bit different in its emphases. When the younger son asks for his share of the inheritance and runs off to squander it in unwholesome and unholy ways, we might have the sense that he should have known better. And while that's true to a certain extent, the fact is that sin is inherently deceitful. It entices. It tempts. It lures. And those who get caught up in it are truly lost. They cannot help themselves. And they won't find their own way back.

We also don't see such great effort being expended to find the lost son. Surely the father prays constantly for it – which should not be dismissed as doing nothing. It's doing a great deal. But he doesn't actually go searching for the boy like the shepherd or the woman. However, if we take another look at the story we see that it's actually God who brings the son to his senses by means of the famine he inflicts on the country where he is. In answer to the father's prayers, it's God who drives the son home.

The joy, however, is the same if not greater. The father runs to embrace his newly returned son. He refuses to hear anything more than the boy's confession of sin, "I've sinned against heaven and against you." When he tries to suggest to his father that he should be brought on as a slave rather than a son, the father silences him. He won't have it that way. "Bring a robe and sandals for his feet! Put a ring on his finger! Slaughter the fatted calf! We're going to have a welcome home party! For this my son who was lost has been found. He was dead, but now he's alive again."

And then comes the third parable's little coda. The older son is profoundly unhappy at the way his father is carrying on over his little brother. He refuses to be part of the celebration. To him it's not right. It's unfair. There ought to be some punishment, some proper humiliation. Forgiveness can only be gained at a price. We need to keep reminding my brother of his shame. We can never let him live it down. How dare my father welcome him back and feast with him.

This is the attitude of the Scribes and Pharisees toward the former notorious sinners who are gathered around Jesus and who are becoming righteous by their association with him. They can't stand to see God's forgiveness so freely given. They want to make it hard for the sinners to come clean and be restored. They want to keep holding their guilt against them. Why? So they can look better by comparison. So they can feel good about themselves. So they can take pride in their own record of obedience. In other words, so that they can continue in their sins that harder to see, but every bit as damnable.

So it is that the father comes out to plead with this lost son – the one full of pride and anger who refuses to rejoice with the host of heaven over a sinner – his own brother – who has repented. The father is asking this son to see his own sin and to repent so that he can receive the same free forgiveness that the father has granted to the younger son. By means of the parable, Jesus is asking the Pharisees and Scribes to see the same thing about themselves and to receive the same forgiveness.

He's telling us that too. As Christians, we all like a good conversion story. We especially like to hear about a notorious criminal or an outspoken atheist or an ISIS terrorist coming to faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They were totally lost and now are found. How sweet. But we give them an excuse: they didn't know any better. They started in the dark, now they've come to the light. We have a bit more trouble when it's one of our own who wander off and get lost in sin and unbelief. We have the sense that they should have known better. And now they should get what they deserve. And should they find their way back to the fold, well, we should never let them live it down.

But that is so wrong. It was a sheep that already belonged to the shepherd that was lost. It was a coin that belonged to the woman that slipped out of sight. It was a son who was loved by his father who went astray. When they were lost, they were utterly helpless. They needed to be found. So it is with anyone who strays from the faith and gets lost in the

deceitfulness of sin. They need to be found. And Jesus would use us to help find them, to call them to repent, and to receive them back into the household of God not as slaves or second class Christians, but as brothers and sisters in Christ who, like us, are righteous only by our association with him.

This man Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. That's good news for you and for me because we meet the description. In this life we always will. Therefore let us daily repent of all sins, especially of the pride and self righteousness that causes us to look upon others as less worthy, so that Jesus may receive us and make us righteous by our association with him. And also so that the angels and all heaven may rejoice now and always over each and every sinner who repents. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!