

The 16th Sunday after Pentecost September 12th, 2010
Luke 15:1-10 “Who are you going to party with?”
the Rev. Michelle Slater

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’

So he told them this parable: ‘Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance

‘Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.” Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.’

Well, it’s “Welcome Back Sunday,” the first Sunday after Labour Day every year when we welcome back many of our members and friends who travel in the summer, or take short breaks from church for golf, or camping, or gardening. Yet the phrase “Welcome Back” implies that all here this morning are, in fact, “back”. It doesn’t account for the fact that, we hope, there are people here this morning for the first time, or second or third time. So Maureen Paetkau, the chair of the Worship Committee, and I have been batting around ideas for a better name. Maureen’s been calling it simply, “Welcome Sunday,” and that is definitely better. But I’ve been pondering “Welcome Home Sunday.” Welcome home.

On first thought, “welcome home” is not much better than “welcome back” if we want newcomers to really feel welcomed and included. But on second thought, maybe “home” is the right to use. For some of us, this is our home, our church home, our faith home, our spiritual home. Yet for others of us, I hope, that even if isn’t true right now, that it could be. I hope that “home” is not only the place that you come from, that is familiar to you, where you already belong and know and are known, but can be also a place that waiting for you, waiting for you to arrive and belong and know and become known. After all, the definition I like best of “home” is by Robert Frost: that “home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”

That's the kind of welcome that Jesus is talking about this morning, in the two parables Penny read us from the Gospel of Luke. He tells of the shepherd who leaves 99 sheep alone and untended, to go after the one who is lost, and the shepherd's joy when the lost one is found. He tells of a woman who loses a coin, part of her savings, and leaves all other duties aside, to sweeping and search until she finds it, and then, she calls her neighbours to rejoice.

They're wonderful parables; the heart of the gospel, in fact. That we are found by God's grace, without deserving it, without having to do anything to earn it. That's who we are. That's who God is. This is our story and our song: "I was once lost, but now am found; was blind but now I see."

For some of us, these are familiar stories indeed. Familiar, and comforting. Yet they were not so familiar, or so comforting, to the ones Jesus told them to. Because he wasn't telling them to the lost ones, the sick, the poor, the outcasts. Oh, they were there, all right, the ones called "sinners," listening in. People who were used to being on the edge of the crowd, unwelcome in polite company. Tax collectors, women of a certain reputation, people who had known bad luck and lost all their land, their flocks, their property. In the eyes of respectable people, leaders of their churches and schools and communities, people somewhat like us, they were the losers of society.

They were losers, and Jesus was hanging out with them. Talking with them. And worst of all, eating with them, possibly even hosting them, as Jesus is said to be "receiving" or "welcoming" them. Sharing meals, then as now, implied a certain familiarity, even intimacy. More than that, table fellowship was an expression of social status in the ancient world. People paid very close attention to who ate with whom, who sat where, what was eaten. Eating together implied sharing the same ideas, the same values, and the same position in society. So by welcoming and eating with those on the very fringes, the most undesirable, the biggest losers, Jesus is equating himself with them. While at the same time, claiming to be speaking about God, about God's nature and about how to live as God desires.

So these beautiful stories, about the lost sheep and the lost coin, both searched for diligently and found and rejoiced over, were not aimed at the ones Jesus was eating with. They didn't need to hear those stories, after all: Jesus was living them, embodying them, in his welcome to his table. The ones who needed to hear these stories were those who objected: the respectable, the well-functioning, the well-educated, and the religious authorities.

And they were and are challenging stories, even though they may be familiar and comfortable. They were challenging, first of all, because Jesus asks them to imagine themselves in the story: "Which one of you..." he asks, inviting them to be that one. Yet what he asks them to imagine themselves to be is...a shepherd. And in Jesus' day, shepherds were a despised occupation, one of the lowest on the social scale.

Not only does he invite them to imagine themselves as a shepherd, but as a foolish one, at that. Because it makes no sense to leave 99 sheep that are safe and secure, alone and undefended in the wilderness, as the parable says, to go after only one. Any cost-benefit analysis would agree that 99 “in the hand” are definitely worth more than 1 “in the bush,” so to speak.

Then, having invited his hearers to see themselves as one of the lowly, one of the outcasts, one of the lowest on the social scale and a foolish one at that, Jesus adds yet another twist: that God is like that despised shepherd who is extravagant about the well-being of every single one of his charges. A shepherd who will risk the well-being of the 99 sheep in order to search for just one.

As if that were not enough to get the picture, Jesus goes on to use another example of just how much God identifies with the lowly and despised: God is like a woman! Another shocking twist for his male audience, who, no matter how poor and outcast they may be, they are at least of higher status than women. And again, God is not just like a woman, but a foolish woman at that. To lose one-tenth of your household savings is bad enough. But then, when she finds it, she spends more than she had recovered on a party! She should be ashamed, for her foolishness, and then her wastefulness. But her joy is greater than her shame. In fact, in her joy, there is no shame at all

Think about that. In God, there is no shame, only joy. No shame about us, only joy. These two parables use people at the bottom of the social ladder to describe the character of God. And they urge those of us who are more respectable, the ones who seem to have it all together, who are functioning well, to not only open ourselves, our hearts, and our lives to those at the bottom...but to rejoice when we are brought together by God.

The religious authorities and other respectable people, who object to Jesus’ sharing meals with the tax collectors and sinners, find it threatening that these losers are coming close to them. After all, these same public and religious leaders have had Jesus in their homes for a meal as well. So when he associates with them, and drags himself and his honour down, he drags their own down as well. He shames them, as well as himself.

It feels threatening, that’s for sure, when those who are different from us, with different values, different ideas, different social status, come near. We can certainly feel uncomfortable, or afraid. Like the 99, we can feel that our safety is at risk, the more attention or resources are given to the other. We can see that fear, that sense of threat, in our neighbours to the south, in the controversy relating to the proposed building of an Islamic cultural centre (including a place for prayer) in New York City, as well as building mosques in other cities. We can see that fear of the other coming near, in the (thankfully, cancelled) plan by a Florida church pastor to burn copies of the

Qur'an yesterday, in commemoration of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York nine years ago.

And we don't always have to look far away to see examples of how we behave when our nearness is threatened by those who are different, those who make us question who we are, where we belong, whether we are safe. The controversy in our own Dunbar neighbourhood about building supportive housing for those who struggle with mental illness and addictions shows us that we too can get caught in those feelings of threat, of shame at being associated with "people like that," of fear for our safety.

Yet we see in these parables that in God, and in God's beloved community, there is no shame when outsiders, when outcasts, when those who look different from us, who worship God in a different way than us, come near. There is only joy. For many of us, who might consider ourselves respectable, worthy, leaders in our church and community, these are stories not so much about being found, as about learning to rejoice. Because both parables end, of course, by calling friends and neighbours to join in the celebration. The movement of joy reaches outward from the one to the many, from the earth to the heavens. So our salvation (which really means our *wholeness*), whether we believe we are found or still being looked for, consists of being drawn into the eternal celebration. For those who are found, the question is, "Who are you ready to party with?"

It's a good question for us, on this "Welcome" or "Welcome Back" or "Welcome Home" Sunday, isn't it? Who are we ready to party with? People who are here for the first time? People who are struggling? People who are addicted or mentally ill, moving into our neighbourhood? People of a different faith than our own? Could all these people find in us, in our neighbourhood, in our community, a home?

I quoted Robert Frost earlier, with his definition of home as "the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." But that's not all the poem says. It goes on to say about home, "I should have called it, something you somehow haven't to deserve." [from "*Death of a Hired Man*" by Robert Frost] Not only a good definition of home, but a good one of grace, God's grace, as well. Whether we are feeling lost, or feeling found, this morning, welcome. Welcome home. Thanks be to God. Amen.

(resources: Holy Textures, David Ewart, www.holytextures.com;
Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels;
Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh; Feasting on the Word,
Year C, Volume 4, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor.)