

Words on the Way: *The Joy of Discipleship*

A Communion Meditation

Luke 15:1-10

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Today is the last in this series of scriptures we have been reading that are about Jesus on the way to Jerusalem.

As I planned this series, it seemed to me that there was no real common theme to these passages—that it was just a hodgepodge of words and events. It seemed to me that the one common theme was that in each of the passages in Luke Jesus is talking. And so we've looked at Jesus' words on the way—words on the way to Jerusalem and words on the Christian way of life.

As we have gone through Jesus' words over these last six weeks, I have begun to realize that there actually has been a common theme. You may have seen it too. In every one of the scriptures we've looked at the last few weeks starting back in chapter 13, Jesus' words have been challenging words about the cost and priority of discipleship. The costliness of following Jesus.

Our scripture today also has its word of conflict and challenge. It's directed at those grumbling religious leaders who weren't happy about whom Jesus was eating with. It is in response to their complaints that Jesus tells these two little stories about the shepherd and the woman searching for their lost treasures and the joy that is occasioned when what is lost is found.

In Jesus' day, what you ate and with whom you ate were critical matters. It doesn't make that much sense to us today, with fast food and family meals around the TV, but eating together was literally a religious experience.

Eating together was a celebration of faith, which included very specific rules about what happened around the table. Cleanliness was paramount: clean food, clean dishes, clean hands, and clean hearts.

Jesus offended a lot of people by ignoring those religious table manners. He readily sat down to eat with people whose lives declared their contempt for religion. People believed that by eating with such sinners, he was also condoning their sin. It is true, from a distance, grace can be mistaken for condoning.

According to Jewish tradition, sinners fell into five basic categories:

1) Samaritans; 2) gentiles; 3) people who did dirty things for a living (such as pig farmers and tax collectors); 4) people who did immoral things (such as liars and adulterers); 5) and people who didn't keep the law to the standards of the religious authorities and Pharisees. Jesus accepted all these people, and even ate with them.

If we were to update the story for today's sensibilities, we might envision Jesus at a table with a child molester, an illegal gun dealer, a garbage collector, a young man with AIDS, a teenage heroin addict, and an unmarried woman on welfare with five children by three different fathers.

Not a place any of us would ever find ourselves, probably, but we can just imagine Jesus at the head of the table, asking the

young drug addict to pass the salt, please, and offering the garbage collector a second cup of coffee before he goes back to work.

[Barbara Brown Taylor, "Table Manners," *The Christian Century*, March 11, 1998, p. 257]

If we were to see such a table, we too might join the Pharisees in complaining, *This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them*. When the Pharisees grumbled about this to Jesus, he told two parables.

He told about a shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep to go searching for the one who was lost and then invited his friends over to sit around the table together for a great feast to celebrate the finding of the one—not celebrating the 99 who had always been there but the one who had been lost and found.

And Jesus told about a woman who had ten coins but lost one of them. She set everything else aside to search for the one that was lost until she found it. And she called her friends and neighbors together to join her at the table to celebrate the finding of the one that was lost.

You know what it's like to lose something precious and to set everything else aside and focus on finding it.

Several years ago we went to Galveston, Texas in the summer with my two brothers and their families and my mom. We were staying in a hotel there. Sam was four years old and Ivy was one. It was after lunch and we had all gone off to our separate rooms to let kids take naps. We had put Ivy to sleep in the bedroom, and Sam was asleep out in the living room

area. Heidi and I went out on the balcony to sit, and we closed the curtains behind us so that it would be dark inside for Sam to sleep.

We had been sitting out there for about twenty minutes, and I decided to go inside to use the phone. I opened the door and pushed open the curtains to walk in, and there were two maintenance men standing in our room. They immediately started telling me about how they had come in to spray for bugs and had thought there were no parents here. My first thought was that they needed to be quiet so they didn't wake up both kids.

Then they said that the lady had taken Sam. I looked in the bed where he was sleeping, and he wasn't there. I thought maybe they meant my mom had taken him. Then they said that they had come in and Sam had started crying and they thought his parents weren't here, so they had given him to the lady.

I said, *What lady?* I was starting to get agitated at this point.

They said, *Just hold on*. One guy was calling someone else on his radio frantically.

I said again, *What lady are you talking about? Some stranger who just happened by?*

They said no, that it was Pam in the administrative office and that they might be down by the pool looking for us.

Well, I was having visions of Sam in a panic, crying, thinking we had left him. So I started down the stairs for the pool. I got

down there, and I didn't see him anywhere, so I ran back up the stairs.

This time, I was about as serious as I can get. I said, *Where is my son?*

They said, *Maybe he's down at the Real Estate office.* I had no idea where that was or what that meant.

Before I turned to walk down the stairs again, I said, *Do you make it a practice of going into people's rooms and taking their children?*

I headed down those stairs a man on a mission. Somebody had my son, I didn't know who, I didn't know where he was, and I could only imagine what he was thinking at the time.

I saw him by the pool. I yelled out his name and ran over to him. Some lady named Pam was holding him, and he was talking away as usual, happy as he could be. I took him from her, and we walked back upstairs.

Like a parent searching for a lost child, Jesus is saying God is setting everything else aside and searching for his lost children. What I didn't do when I found Sam that makes my story different than the one Jesus told is, I didn't invite everyone else over to celebrate that he was found.

The religious leaders are complaining because Jesus is having dinner with tax-collectors and sinners. In response, Jesus tells these two parables about finding a lost sheep and finding a lost coin and how there will be such celebration for the one that is found. *Rejoice with me, for the lost has been found.*

You know what the key to these stories is? The table. The table of shared meal and celebration. The key to the stories Jesus told is not just that they searched for the lost ones and found them but that when the lost were found they invited everyone over to gather around the table to celebrate the return. The focus of both of Jesus' stories is the celebration that everyone is invited to when the lost are found.

At the end of both stories is the invitation: *Rejoice with me, for the lost has been found.* The end of both of these stories is an invitation to the table.

The question these little parables raise is not whether or not you or I will repent and be found by Jesus. The question is whether or not you or I will come to the table and join the feast when God celebrates the return of one of his children—even if it is someone who is not like us and unworthy of God's grace by our standards.

Jesus' words here expose the foundation of our relationship with God. The foundation of our relationship with God is exposed so we can see whether it is built on our presumption of merit or on God's mercy. Is my relationship with God built on a foundation of concern for my own just rewards, or is it built on my shared celebration of God's dogged determination to show mercy to all people?

The parables also suggest one of the deep truths about God's mercy: only those who celebrate God's grace to others can receive it themselves. Grace is the rule at God's table.

[thanks to my former professor Dr. Alan Culpepper's commentary in Luke, New Interpreter's Bible]

And to eat from this table is to lay down whatever claim we have to isolation or separation or superiority or inferiority compared with anyone else.

In fact, you've got to let go of all that stuff in order to free your hands for sharing the loaf and the cup. We are all guests together here with the same host.

The Lord's Table will seat as many people as will come and join the feast. Everybody will be seated at this one table.

The lost have been found. And in celebration God has invited all of us to come to his table for a celebration feast. When you prepare to receive the Lord's Supper today, you're going to have to ask yourself if you're ready to take your seat at the table. It's not a table for one.

When you prepare to receive the Lord's Supper today,
just put down in the pew beside you separation.
Lay down your isolation.
Lay down inferiority.
Lay down superiority.
Lay down the pain of broken connections and relations.

Just lay all that down in the pew beside you and say yes to the Lord's invitation: *Rejoice with me, for the lost has been found.* Can you say yes to that? Can you join in the celebration of the lost being found—no matter who it is?

We've talked about the cost of discipleship over these last several weeks. What we have today is a challenging invitation to the joy of discipleship.

Are you ready for the joy? Are you able today to set everything else aside and respond to God's invitation to joy? *Rejoice with me, for the lost has been found.* Can you find yourself at God's table of joy?