

Where He Finds You
I Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

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September 15, 2013

“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.’”

Imagine Jesus sitting at a table in a public place, maybe even a table near a busy thoroughfare, covered with a plastic tablecloth flapping in the wind and held down by tethered bunches of helium-filled balloons. Services have just let out and the people who have been praying and singing and following along in the Bible as the lessons were read, the folks who have listened to yet another long sermon and repeated the Apostles’ Creed and put a check in the plate representing a summer’s worth of their pledge, these people of God which is to say you and I begin to head out to the Homecoming picnic only to find that the seats have all been taken by people who are, well, not our kind. First of all, they have no interest in organized religion; second, by the look of things, they have no respect for what we value; and third, they have no conscience about freeloading on the church’s hospitality. The grumbling becomes audible as does the cacophony of joy exploding around each table, like a twenty-first century contrapuntal fugue, until someone from the congregation shouts, “What in the name of God is Jesus doing with *them*?” Everyone falls silent except Jesus who knows a teachable moment when he is handed one. He tells two short parables that take the form of very long and loaded questions, followed by a longer parable about a father and two sons. All three stories end with a party thrown so that simply everyone may share the joy of the one who has found what was lost.

Just in case the stories whizzed by your ear too fast to notice Jesus’ carefully chosen details, let me underline a few of them. In the first place, consider the escalating odds: one in a hundred sheep lost; one in ten coins lost; one of two sons lost. As a friend and theologian suggested to me on a sailboat in the middle of the fog one summer in Maine, Jesus may have had his percentages off in the first parable. Surely the population of strays exceeds one percent of the normal herd; and the faithful followers number less than ninety-nine per hundred. But what about the equally off odds of finding one without losing more? If you were the shepherd, would you risk your whole flock to retrieve the one that has wandered off? Maybe not. If you were the woman looking for a coin that probably represented a tenth of your savings—quite a bit more valuable than the one lost lamb--the odds go up considerably because the only thing I think you would have to lose in return for a significant gain is the time it takes to search. Finally which of you, being the parent of two children, if you lost one—if you lost the one showing no deference for authority, no respect for your values, no conscience about freeloading, while the other obedient, hard-working, responsible child never left your side--which of you would throw a party when the lost son showed up even if throwing the party meant losing your relationship with the other son?

The party Luke had in mind as he set these stories in the context of table fellowship may have been the party, the joyful feast of the people of God that the church regularly celebrated to give thanks for God’s lost Son returned from the grave. Around the Lord’s Table in the first century, the company included Jews who had left behind father and mother, sisters and brothers to become followers of Jesus; and, more and more, table fellowship included Gentiles: two sorts of people with whom the righteous could not eat and remain righteous.

So these stories that began with a question ended with an invitation which served as a segue to the present moment. Everyone listening on that day was invited to the table where Jesus was present and presently breaking bread in the company of the highway and byway folks from the parable of the wedding feast in Luke’s last chapter. To accept the invitation was to find yourself at a party for those who once were lost and now are found, a number that seems to include wretched little you!

This was not even a remote possibility for the righteous, the grumblers. Luke identifies them as Pharisees and scribes. Pharisee, meaning *separate* in Hebrew, certainly stood for the set-apart-ness of those who lived so as not to defile the holy. Yet separate also aptly describes the body language of people in any community who are prone to grumbling about other people. Think of the grumbling in this community, usually done at a bit of a remove from the person or person grumbled about and often done from a higher moral elevation. Grumblers like to think of themselves as invulnerable to particular aspects of human fallenness and so are seldom in need of changing, of turning around, of repenting.

Consider therefore, in the second place, the details surrounding the “not lost” in Jesus’ parables: ninety-nine sheep left in the wilderness; nine coins in the woman’s possession; one son at home on the ranch. As for the fate of the ninety-nine, Luke’s Jesus paints a dire picture. The same parable in Matthew has the shepherd leaving them on a mountain, the place where God comes near to the earth. By design, I think, the shepherd in Luke leaves his flock alone in the wilderness. What is lost in our translation but surely was not lost on Jesus’ audience or Luke’s readers is the connotation of the Greek verb for leave (*kataleipō*). According to New Testament professor Raj Nadella, a better word would be abandoned. The shepherd abandons the ninety-nine in the wilderness, which in

Luke's Gospel is a place of vulnerability. How else to save the righteous?

It seems to me that Luke has Jesus tell these parables to the Pharisees in the wild hope that they might realize, sooner rather than later, how vulnerable and lost they are without him. Given Jesus' disputes with organized religion and the religiously righteous of his day destined to end in his death, I am suddenly struck with the notion that Jesus wanted at them as much or more than he wanted at the sin-sick souls of the socially or morally lost, Paul being God's case in point. The latter were easy marks with nothing to lose and a whole new life to gain by their association with Jesus. Outcast and alone, hiding in the dark corners of society, down and out on their luck, having hit the proverbial bottom, they were utterly vulnerable and ready to be done with the life they were leading.

But getting through to the righteous, having at the heart of those who seem to have it all together on Sunday morning is a Holy Other matter. Two thousand years later, I wonder what Luke would think of us. Could he ever have imagined Christians being the ones grumbling at the sight of a bunch of losers enjoying Jesus' company when Jesus' company was seen as nothing but losers in Luke's time? Or could it be that the truly lost of any age, the ones Jesus is coming after in these three stories, are the true believers, the grumbling community of older brothers who took one look at the company Jesus kept and scattered on the Hill for brunch and a Bloody Mary to wash down their disdain?

Still, the thing about a parable is that its truth keeps turning paradoxically inside-out, so there is one last turn to take before the party begins, a party to which you are all invited. The turn happens in the House for All Saints and Sinners, a Lutheran mission church in Denver, Colorado led by a six-foot tall tattooed female comic and recovering addict named Nadia Bolz-Weber. Nadia grew up in a conservative Church of Christ family that had given her what she called a "sorting system" of containers into which every person and idea was to be placed: "'saved' and 'not saved' ... 'us' and 'not us' ... 'good' and 'bad.'" When in her teenage years she quit the Church of Christ for drugs, alcohol, tattoos and liberal causes, she simply kept the sorting system and switched the labels. Long story short, Nadia is now a theologically, liturgically and musically traditional Lutheran minister (when I read that she loathes praise bands, I liked her instantly) who founded a congregation that began with eight and had leveled out at forty-five edgy, marginalized young urban singles.

Then one day something unmentionable hit the fan. The Sunday after Easter Sunday, when Nadia had been featured on the front page of the *Denver Post*, church attendance doubled in size. The House for All Saints and Sinners was invaded by suburban "baby boomers who wore Dockers and ate at Applebee's." Nadia was furious and mostly afraid that the edgy, marginalized people her "precious little indie boutique of a church" had always attracted would see the people who looked like their parents and think, "This isn't for me." So she called a meeting where she imagined the people with Dockers would get that they really did not belong in this party and go home to the suburbs. Nervous and needing moral support, Nadia reached out to a friend who served a similar church in St. Paul for sympathy and instead was given a heart transplant. To her complaints about these interlopers her friend said, "You guys are really good at 'welcoming the stranger' when it's a young transgender person. But sometimes the stranger looks like your mom and dad." After her grumbling subsided, Nadia was convinced that God had come to her in the form of a friend who was just enough of a jerk to tell her the truth.

When the night of the meeting arrived, the room was filled. "Michael Meehan spoke up [to say] that he had no idea what he believed, but knew something real happened in the Eucharist. He would never have been at the House for All Saints and Sinners if he wasn't sure that broken people were welcome. A seventy-three-year-old Episcopal deacon named Marcia said that while she knew she was a bit older than most of us, she felt that HFASS was a place where she really could pray and be herself. Next Jennifer, a Brownie leader who had for the past few weeks been driving forty-five minutes in from the suburbs, said that she wasn't sure if she fit in this church, but she knew that it was worth the drive to feel as close to God as she did in our liturgy.

"Then Asher spoke up. 'As the young transgender kid who was welcomed into this community, I just want to go on the record and say that I'm really glad there are people at church who now look like my mom and dad. Because I have a relationship with them that I just can't with my own mom and dad...."

"It goes without saying," Nadia concludes, "that the House for All Sinners and Strangers is stronger now because of those newcomers. You can look around at the [240] or so people gathered on any given Sunday and think *I am unclear what all these people have in common*. Out of the corner of your eye there's the homeless guy serving communion to a corporate lawyer and out of the other corner is a teenage girl with pink hair holding the baby of a suburban soccer mom." Maybe what they have in common is the one who once told a story about a shepherd with a hundred sheep who lost one and abandons the ninety-nine in the wilderness to go after the one that is lost until he finds it and when he finds it, he lays it on his shoulder and rejoices and when he comes home calls together his friends saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." In fact, I wonder if on some Sundays there is so much joy in heaven over one soccer mom who repents that the joy simple takes the ninety-nine tattooed ex-addicts by surprise at the party thrown by the God who waits to welcome both saints and sinners home. Thanks be to God!