

September 11, 2016

Scripture Lesson

Psalm 14

I Timothy 1:12-17

Sermon *Don't Wait, Search*

This morning we will read two parables that are Jesus' response to criticism that he "receives sinners and eats with them." To fully understand the implications of Jesus' action, and the Pharisees' complaint, it is necessary to understand the importance of "table fellowship." You see, during the time of Jesus it was not customary that a person would just sit down and eat with "anyone." To eat with someone implied acceptance or recognition that the guest was acceptable to the host. Breaking bread together was like an act of full embrace, the embrace of acceptance and recognition; acceptance of the personhood of the guest and recognition that the guest was worthy of sitting at table with the host. The dinner table was central to the culture. The way that both Jesus and John the Baptist treated this cultural event was central to them both. John ate no bread and drank no wine; that is, he had table fellowship with no one. Jesus, on the other hand, ate and drank with everyone. In chapter 7 he, Jesus, was even accused of being "a glutton and a drunkard." His critics wondered out loud why Jesus would break societal norms, give the recognition of table – fellowship to sinners and tax collectors.

It is also important to understand why tax-collectors were viewed so poorly by the people. Now granted, even today you may not want to see the tax collector pull up in front of your door, but the reasons are different now. Today you might fear that the tax-collector will leave with some of your money, but in Israel the people despised the tax-collectors because they were viewed as persons who had betrayed the people of their homeland, of Israel, by working for the Roman Empire. The people were taxed for the benefit of their occupying army and the tax-collectors were but collaborators of the Romans. They were seen as traitors to their own people.

It is easy enough, isn't it, to sit back at a safe distance and cheer Jesus on as he welcomes sinners and socializes with them' it is not so easy to be his disciple in this matter. The point is, the Pharisees stand in a reasonable and long-respected position; they are not alone in believing that the separation of good and bad people preserves a community's sense of righteousness. We have Christians who do that even today. Jesus' behavior was radical and disturbing to them. The church that calls him Lord still finds it so.

Luke 15:1-10

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 neighbors, 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 neighbors, 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.’

These two parables say essentially the same thing, with repetition being used to emphasize the point. The sheep is lost, in the parable, as are the sinners who gather in Jesus’ presence. Love for the lost sheep is so strong that the 99 are left in the wilderness while the search is on. Such ‘seeking love’ takes great risks. The 99 are at risk when the shepherd’s attention is turned to finding the one.

The woman’s ten silver coins represented about ten days’ wages and many months of savings. She, like the shepherd, seeks diligently “until she finds it;” there is no giving up in either story.

Notice the contrast between the example Jesus gives and the way we do evangelism in the church today. Haven’t we in the church neglected to seek out the lost – and instead – expected them to come to us? The woman, Jesus said, searched until she found it.

.... There is a difference between “come and hear” ministries and “go and tell” ministries. People often say, “Come and hear the gospel taught at our church.” Jesus’ instruction to his church was not to invite people to “come and hear,” but for believers to “go and tell.” The main responsibility is not to bring the lost to the gospel, but to take the gospel to the lost. Jesus wants us to go and witness, but we have interpreted it to mean, “Go and invite people to church.”

On our farm in Illinois we had no sheep. I have no good sheep stories, but I do know a little bit about other types of livestock. The furthest thing from our house, but still within the general collection of buildings on our farm was the cattle feedlot. I fed the cattle twice daily and one day when I was doing so I noticed the head of a steer looking out at me from between the corn rows. You see, there was an 80 acre field on the other side of the fence from the lot. Nearly 60 of the 80

acres were tillable and we had put those acres in corn that year. The other twenty acres of this enclosed area contained a large farm pond, some timber and a grass waterway. I walked out and discovered a hole in the fence and after a count of the remaining cattle – I knew he was not alone. There were 3 missing head! Just like the author of Little Boy Blue I knew that the cows didn't belong in the corn.

Now I was taller than those steers, but the corn was about ten feet high. Chasing them was very difficult – actually, finding them could be very difficult. I mean – you have to get real close before you can even see them. If they are walking you might hear them walking through the corn long before you see them. Tracks down at your feet can be helpful, but you may not know if they were made a few minutes ago or yesterday.

As much as I might have wanted to I really couldn't leave the steers in the cornfield. Not only do they knock down corn, but they could founder or even die on such a rich diet. Now if the pond had not been in the field my task would have been easier. I could have built a catching pen up near my feedlot and transported a sufficient amount of water into a tank in the pen and then laid in wait in the thick corn with the intention of shutting a gate on them when they were drinking. I may have had to hide for a few hours but they would eventually look for water. Isn't that the way we often do in the church? We put the living water inside of our building and then we hope people will be enticed to discover it on their own or to come at our invitation and then to join with us. A "come and hear" ministry which is kind of a reversal of the Great Commission.

Because I could not entice my steers out of the corn field I was forced to "go and get them" myself. In Jesus' parable the shepherd dropped what he was doing to seek out the lost sheep. Isn't that what the church should do? We need to put more emphasis on reaching out to others and bringing them into the fold; more than just waiting for them to come to us. We need to go get them.

While it is true that the church serves as a community for the faithful, a place where Christians can feel at home, it is not the mission of the church to become some sort of a closed clan. In terms familiar to the modern world; the church cannot use its desire to be "user friendly" to the known and knowledgeable members of a congregation as an excuse to be inaccessible to those still living without the entry password. The greater part of the church's mission is to be "seeker-friendly" – to offer to the lost and lonely ones of the earth easy access to the divine love and salvation that awaits them in the words of Jesus Christ.

The church was not intended to function like some "country club" for Christians. The church's primary mission is not to provide meeting space, or potluck dinners, or concerts. The church's mission is to ring out the Good News of the gospel to all those who are outside the walls of the church. When we only look to the needs and comforts of those already in our midst, we take on the role of an

Esau – selling out our birthright mission for a mess of comfortable in-house pottage.

It is the completely lost sheep, the totally disappeared coin, that sets the searcher on an all-out recovery mission. ...How does the church become a “seeker-friendly” organism? How does the church become a seeker of souls? It takes more than multiple open doors, a big parking lot, and good sermons or good music. Let’s ask ourselves some questions.

Who are our neighbors?

Take this literally. Who lives next door, down the street, across the back lot and around the corner? Just as importantly, do you know them?

“Seeker-friendly” means being friendly to seekers. Being “friendly,” in case we’ve forgotten, means extending our selves, going out of our way, showing interest in others and their interests, even when they are not interested in us. Being “seeker-friendly” often means that we become the seekers – moving out from behind church structure and facilities and into the community.

If we are to be loyal to the cause of Christ we must go out and engage ourselves with persons who need our savior. We have ‘good news’ to share. Share it with your family, your friends and your neighbors. Reach out for them, go out and search them out, just like the shepherd and the woman – seek the lost and bring them in. Surveys show that only 7% of the people who join a church come because of the minister; 70% come because they were invited by a friend, a relative, or a neighbor. You have “good news” to tell. Go and tell it!