

The Sunday of the Transfiguration of the Lord
February 14, 2010
St. Mark Presbyterian Church in Boerne, Texas
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The Parables of the Lost: The Lost Sheep

The three parables in the 15th chapter of the gospel of Luke lay bare the unique and radical heart of the gospel of Jesus. All three parables have to do with something that was lost and then found. A lost sheep. A lost coin. Two lost sons. During the Season of Lent this year we will be digging beneath the surface for the deeper meaning of these parables of the lost.

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Listen for the Word of God as it is recorded in the 15th chapter of the gospel of Luke:

Luke 15:1-8

“He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.”

My favorite novel of all time is **To Kill a Mockingbird**. I know that isn't exactly an original choice, but I read it for the first time during a particularly impressionable point in my adolescence. I was even then growing up in a segregated world and Atticus Finch's courage touched some deep nerve in me

One of the real “characters” in the Novel is Aunt Alexandra, who believed one of the most important things in life is for a person to “know his or her place.” Aunt Alexandra “never let a chance escape her to point out the shortcomings of other tribal groups to the greater glory of our own...” (p. 131). One day her niece, Scout, wants to invite Walter Cunningham, to dinner. Walter is a classmate who lives “across the tracks.” Aunt Alexandra replies:

“Don't be silly, Jean Louise. The thing is, you can scrub Walter Cunningham till he shines, you can put him in shoes and a new suit, but he'll never be like (your brother) Jem. You should be friendly and polite to him, you should be gracious to everybody, dear. But you don't have to invite him home.” (p.226-27)

To sit down and eat with someone in the ancient Near East was a token of acceptance. So when the Pharisees and religious scholars growled that Jesus was inviting table fellowship with “*men and women of doubtful reputation*”...sinners according to the New Revised Standard Version...the air became electric that day.. The crowd was transforming into a hostile mob. Why? Simply because Jesus was receiving and eating with sinners? Isn't that what Jesus is supposed to do? Perhaps that does not get your blood boiling. But imagine this.

Palestine was an occupied country. Imperial Rome had invaded Israel and was ruling with all its power. Now nationalistic forces were gaining strength among the Jews. The

smoldering of revolt would burst into flame in a few brief years. In this highly charged political world Jesus was cozying up to tax collectors...Jews who were cooperating with the Roman Army. They were *collaborators* and as such were hated by their own people. So, by association, Jesus was being charged with being a traitor. A collaborator.

Most of us have never had any experience living in an occupied country. It is hard for us to fully appreciate the kind of hatred that forms in such an atmosphere. The hate generated toward traitors is always greater than that for the enemy. Perhaps some of you remember the French treatment of collaborators after the liberation of Paris from the Nazis. Parisienne women who had collaborated with the Germans were dramatically humiliated in public...some even brutalized by angry mobs..

Jesus is charged not only with treating these collaborators decently...but with inviting them to church...with accepting them as brothers and sisters in faith. It is in the context of such "righteous" hatred that Jesus tells these three parables of the lost who are found.

Throughout these parables Jesus uses language and images which are calculated to shock and offend his audience. If we had been among the Pharisees listening to him we would have at the very least felt Jesus had very poor manners. But it was not just a matter of poor manners. Jesus was consciously attempting to offend them.

Why? In our country we aspire to the ideal of social equality for all people. The framers of our Constitution expressly repudiated the European system of social rank which divided society into the favored aristocrats and the underprivileged commoners. However, though social rank is more informal in the United States...we have hardly done away with it. Rank is important to us. But in a Middle Eastern village...rank means everything. Rank is rigidly observed. All social discourse takes rank into account. To fail to do so is a significant personal offense. Social rank is based on family...on occupation...and on religious attachments. Rank is never, ever violated. Jesus violated the social rank of the Pharisees with the very first sentence he spoke.

"Which of you, having 100 sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go and seek the one which is lost until he finds it?"

To our ears that sounds perfectly harmless. Sheep ranching is now a respectable occupation. None of us would be particularly offended by being identified as a sheep rancher. But not so with Jesus' audience. They were incensed. In Jesus' day shepherds were very poor and dressed in rags and wandered over the countryside virtually destitute. In many ways they were like lepers. They were unclean in the religious sense because they followed their sheep into Gentile areas. They were to be avoided if at all possible. Contact with a shepherd required you to go through purification rites before you could attend worship again. Shepherds were as despised as sinners and tax collectors. Yet Jesus begins by calling the Pharisees shepherds. *"Which one of you, being a shepherd..."* Jesus says. Imagine the insult.

Now a Pharisee might own 100 sheep to be sure. But never in a 100 years would a Pharisee have herded them himself. It was unthinkable. Not only would a Pharisee not have gone into the wilderness to find one lost sheep...he would not have gone into the

wilderness to find all 100 if they were lost. And yet Jesus addresses them as though they themselves were mere shepherds who might be trudging through the wilderness looking for sheep. It was the height of insult.

The Pharisees stood before Jesus with their fine clothes and Jesus spoke to them as though they were ragged sheep herders. They stood before Jesus in their educated sophistication and Jesus spoke to them as though they were uneducated villagers. In short, Jesus refused to show proper deference to their rank.

Why would Jesus do such a thing? We would have expected him to find some point of common ground with them so they might support him. But this was not to be. Jesus' language is strong. His style was confrontational. A struggle was on for the lives of people. Jesus had set his face to go to Jerusalem. When lives are at stake only a strong and uncompromising love will save.

There is a strong word here about rank and social status. A strong, confronting word about groups of any kind. And if I am hearing Jesus faithfully, what the Lord says is this:

“When the lives of my children are at stake, when there is one yet lost in the wilderness, then I will not stand on your formalities, nor recognize your rank, nor pause to posture appropriate manners. I will stop at nothing. I will press forward at all costs to find and to save. If you must label me as a part of your group in order to hear me, then you will never hear me.”

Here is a pointed lesson about the groups to which we belong. Christians need to choose the groups with which we identify very carefully. In particular we need to ask ourselves how the groups with which we identify relate to outsiders. You should ask yourself:

“Does this group teach me to distrust those outside it? Does this group teach me to discount...encourage me to put down...those who are not members of the group? Is this group willing to acknowledge and affirm the worth and value of those who are not members of it?”

Every group that is healthy must hold very loosely to its boundaries. Every group that is healthy will listen with openness to outsiders.

Jesus himself always comes to us as an outsider. Jesus always comes to us from outside our human-made groups...whether they be nations or social cliques. Jesus can never be encompassed within any of our groups...not even the church. Think about it this way. Jesus comes to us as an outsider...and if we are not listening to outsiders...we may never meet Jesus at all. AMEN