

“Lost and Found Items”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
March 18, 2007
Scripture: Luke 15:1-10

On this third Sunday in March, a day we share our congregational 3rd Sunday lunch after worship, I want to make a claim. Lunch tables are contested places. Don’t believe me? Let me give you four examples.

The recent movie, *North Country*, told the story of the first female miners at Eveleth Mines here in Minnesota. These first women, looking for jobs to support their family, were repeatedly harassed by their male co-workers. At lunch, when workers went on break, the women ate together, separated by gender because they were not welcomed at any of the other tables. And while there, their lunch table was the scene of some of the most vile and painful attacks.

In the South, the non-violent Civil Rights movement took hold in lunch counter protests. It was a different era, in more ways than one, but in those days of dime store lunch counters, it was a provocative act for black college students to go sit at a lunch counter, and try to order a meal. Some of the most powerful and painful pictures of the movement are of white people with looks of pure hatred on their face pouring syrup and hot coffee on those brave students, while others violently dragged them off their lunch stools. The slow move toward integration started at those lunch counters.

For a third example, think of the lunch tables in your junior high school. The table arrangements signified social status and cliques. By looking at the tables, you could tell who was popular, where the basketball team was, who belonged to whom. And if someone “didn’t belong” at your table, it was quickly made known. More than simply a place to eat during the school day, Lunch tables were for maintaining social hierarchies, and keeping cliques pure. Meal tables are highly symbolic in all cultures, and contested places.

Jesus did not rest easy with the lunch table arrangements of his day. And he faced severe criticism as a result. Our story today from the gospel of Luke includes two parables of lost items being found: a lost sheep, and a lost coin. Immediately following our passage, Jesus goes on to tell the parable of the Prodigal Son, who was lost to his family and himself, and found himself, despite his wasteful living, welcomed home by his father. But our stories begin with conflict at the lunch table.

Luke doesn’t tell us much in the way of setting the scene. We don’t know where Jesus is, if this is a major holiday or religious feast, if the disciples are around, what Jesus was eating, or anything. All we are told is that

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.” (Luke 15:1-2).

Breaking bread together, sharing a meal. The sign and seal of full acceptance. And that bugged the Pharisees and the Scribes. “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” It was a complaint as well as an accusation. And, as we will see, “the reaction of the Pharisees is a sign of profound disagreement with Jesus as to who God is and how God acts.”¹

Fred Craddock begins his commentary on this passage with a caution to us church-going listeners.

Before moving to the parables themselves, the reader will want to take a moment to consider where he or she is sitting while receiving the stories. Is it beside Jesus . . . or is it among those being addressed by Jesus?²

It is a critical question for us. Can you picture yourself, sitting next to Jesus at lunch, eating, sharing stories, laughing together? If you can picture yourself seated with Jesus, can you go on to imagine yourself widely and publicly criticized as a sinner? Or are you more likely an upstanding citizen, nervous about how this religious leader is blurring the lines of morality and keeping questionable company?

The Pharisees and the scribes have a point, you know. “Be careful about the company you keep,” we teach our youth. What parent has not said something like, “birds of a feather flock together.” Parents genuinely worry about their children’s friends. Craddock continues, The Pharisees are not alone in believing that the separation of good and bad people preserves a community’s sense of righteousness and is essential for the moral instruction of the young. Jesus’ failure to observe such distinctions seemed to some dangerous to the moral and religious fiber of the community and disturbingly radical.³

It still is. Back to the high school cafeteria. Segregated tables are a code – they show who has acceptance and who does not. Distinctions between jocks and geeks, popular and unpopular, black and white are visible in who sits at which tables. And if someone is allowed to join the “wrong” table the person inviting them faces ridicule and expulsion.

“Inclusiveness” may be a popular buzzword, but if theologian James Alison is correct, “The established order has no problem with the existence of excluded people. Rather, it depends on them.”⁴

The Pharisees and scribes tried to shame Jesus, to ridicule him along with those poor sinners who had dared sit next to this rabbi. Can you imagine sitting there next to Jesus, being criticized and shamed. Who knows what you have done or not done in your life, but clearly, the Pharisees and Scribes think you are not worthy to be at a table with this Rabbi Jesus.

For the Pharisees and scribes, religion was about keeping things neat and orderly. God rewarded good behavior and punished bad behavior. It would not do to have good and bad mix. It wasn’t right to call bad good or risk the purity of the good. If God is good, they thought, then God must have nothing to do with sinners.

So Jesus answered their complaints and accusations with three stories, two short parables leading up to the parable of the Prodigal Son. “Which one of you,” Jesus asks the Pharisees and scribes, “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?”

I wonder what they thought about his question. I mean, it is one thing to leave the ninety-nine sheep in a safe and secure area and then go off looking for the lost one. But Jesus says nothing about having time to make sure the ninety-nine would be secure. It would be reckless to expose the ninety-nine to dangers and rustlers to go off searching for one lost sheep. But Jesus does not do the same risk-assessment math that the Pharisees do.

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."

"Or what woman," Jesus goes on, 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."

And in case we thought these were just stories, Jesus makes sure we get the connection between what happens in these parables and heavenly delight. The parable of the lost sheep ends with Jesus' shocking quote, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance." He concludes his parable of the lost coin saying, "Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Thus between the complaints about eating with sinners and the parables of lost and found items, we can see a profound disagreement between Jesus and the Pharisees about the nature of God and how God acts. The Pharisees thought that God rewarded good behavior and did not want good and bad to mix. That God was good, and did not linger with sinners, but rushed to reward good people (like them). Jesus told stories describing a thorough hunt for what had been lost and said, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance."

It is so convenient for us to conceptualize things with stark, black and white divisions that mark off the good versus the evil. "The goodies and the baddies" British theologian James Alison likes to say. And that is what the Pharisees thought. Jesus seems to accept their labeling of sinners, when he said, "Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." But then Jesus turned that distinction between righteous persons and sinners on its head. For it is not that neat. A lost sheep isn't exactly a sinner, is it? A coin that dropped off a dresser and fell into a crack did not sin.⁵ We are all a mixture of motives and our results are far from pure. As the Apostle Paul put it, in fairly strong terms, "for I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. . . So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand" (Romans 7:19-21). Another way of putting it is to say we have all been lost, and it is only through the grace of God that we have been found.

In the invitation to the communion table, we say, “None of us comes because of our worthiness.” And the same can be said of any meal in which Jesus is present as host or guest. We come as guests invited. And we fail to follow Jesus if we then try to save a table for just us, or those just like us, or just those we like. I so appreciate our 3rd Sunday lunches, because these lunches help us to live out what we say we believe. Certainly these lunches are a time to catch up with good friends. Sometimes a table will include family members from 3 generations. But at these round tables that seat eight, no one is to be excluded. And there are no private tables, or reserved seats. You cannot call ahead and say, “save me the best table please, the one by the window.” These lunches are an example and an extension of Jesus’ meals. Healthy food that strengthens the body. Conversations that inspire and nourish the soul. Rich and poor at table together. Old friends and complete strangers, breaking bread together.

When I am traveling, most airport announcements fade into a kind of blur. One learns to ignore the announcements about heightened security levels. But my senses always heighten when the overhead speaker says “will so and so return to security checkpoint for a lost item.” I never fail to quickly check my pockets for phone, palm pilot, wallet – even my belt. I assume that it may have been me that lost something.

In shopping malls, hearing an announcement about a lost child has always sent my heart worrying. What happened to the parents? What must the child be thinking? Didn’t the parents notice that the child had wandered off? The parents are looking for the child, aren’t they?

“Which one of you,” Jesus asked, “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?” As they heard this story of a shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to go in search of the lost sheep, even the Pharisees might have recalled words burned deep in their hearts from the 23rd Psalm. The Psalm that begins, “the Lord is my Shepherd.” We all want that kind of shepherd, don’t we, who will not stop looking for us. We all want that kind of shepherd who will keep looking for us even when we wander off. We all want that kind of shepherd who will not stop looking for us until we are found, even when we want to be lost.

When I was a child, I used to love playing Hide and Seek. I loved trying to coming up with the best hiding spot ever – a place no one would ever think to look. But after a while, I would realize that it is lonely to be in the best hiding spot ever. And I would give a little whistle, or open a door a crack, or bump something. Anything to be found. That was the fun in the game, being found.

I once was lost, but now am found. Amen.

¹ James Alison, Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001) 10.

² Fred Craddock, Luke in the Interpretation commentary series (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1990) 184.

³ Craddock, 185.

⁴ Alison, 9.

⁵ In these two short parables, Jesus is paving the way for the longer and more radical parable of the Prodigal Son, in which the “lost” item is a person who made conscious and deliberate choices. But Jesus is clearly blending the concepts of lost and sin to refute the Pharisees’ complaint “this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”