

Sept. 12, 2010

Luke 15:1-10

“God’s mercy for the lost”

Criticism. How we hate it. How we hear it! All our lives through! It begins early in life and continues on through the whole of it!

“Jenny!” A mother shrieks at her daughter. “How could you? I told you not to touch the brownies I made for the party!! How could you? That was a VERY naughty girl. VERY, VERY naughty!” Two year old Jenny hangs her head in shame and embarrassment, looking at her toes, as the chocolate smeared on her cheeks dries to a crusty paste.

“Dad!” a teenage son shouts at his father. “Can’t you learn to KNOCK before you come into my room? Can’t I get ANY privacy around here?? It would just be common courtesy, like you and Mom are always harping on!” The dad replies huffily, “For heaven’s sake—I’m your DAD. I’ve given you baths and changed your diapers—I don’t know why you have to be so ridiculous! I didn’t do ANYTHING wrong!”

Criticism. You hear it. I hear it. You dish it out. I dish it out. And those two little anecdotes illustrate the two basic ways we respond to criticism when it’s directed our way.

We feel one of two things: **ashamed** or **self-righteous**.

When we feel ashamed we think, “Lord, I can’t BELIEVE I DID that. It was too bad/stupid/dumb. I’ll never be able to hold my head up again. Never. I screwed up so badly this time—I don’t think anything could make up for it. I’m lost, hopeless, worthless.”

When we feel self-righteous we think, “I am a fine, good person. I know what’s right, what’s wrong, what ought to be done—and I DO IT. How could anyone criticize me?? It’s ridiculous. I’m not confused, wrong or lost—EVER. THEY are the ones who are confused, wrong, lost!”

Our Gospel for today presents a couple stories Jesus once told. Interestingly, he told these stories in response to criticism. The religious leaders were criticizing him for “welcoming sinners and eating with them”.

Notice, Jesus did not respond to criticism in either of the ways I just described. He did not hang his head in shame and say, “You know, you’re right. I don’t know what I could have been thinking--- these people are truly unsavory—I just got carried away, thinking I could influence them for good with my love and acceptance. I got so confused and lost I couldn’t see the truth of your position—that we should PROTECT ourselves from evil by avoiding it; and that we can only change evil by ostracizing or punishing it. I’m so ashamed. I really screwed up.”

Nor did Jesus reply, “You are all such idiots! You think you know so much, but you only see snatches of the truth! I don’t know HOW you could criticize ME! I am the SON OF THE LIVING GOD, you blind bats! How DARE YOU talk to me this way!?”

No shame. No self-righteousness. Jesus just told a few stories that teach us about our shame and self-righteousness. And he didn’t even harp on the point of the stories, you know. He just told them and let them bubble like stew in the hearts and minds of the hearers.

Before we go further in reflecting on the stories Jesus told, let’s be sure we understand something about the Pharisees, the religious leaders. They are really US, you see. They were people who loved God and wanted to do what is right. Jesus was doing things that WERE way out of line. Breaking bread together was an act of full acceptance in Jesus’ culture. The word translated “welcomes” as in “he welcomes sinners” could actually mean that Jesus was HOSTING these people, and not just present with them at someone else’s dinner.

The Pharisees’ position comes from the Bible: Look at Proverbs 1:15; Psalm 1; Isaiah 52:11----- they all speak a strong warning about associating with evil persons. Paul found those warnings important too, and used them as he dealt with moral issues in the church at Corinth—see 2 Cor.6:14-18. Most of us are familiar with the Pharisees’ viewpoint. How many of us warn our children about who to choose as friends? In commentator Fred Craddock’s words: *It is easy enough to sit at a safe distance and cheer on Jesus as he receives sinners and socializes with them; it is not so easy to be his disciple in the matter. The point is, the Pharisees stand in a reasonable and long-respected position; Jesus’ behavior is radical and disturbing.*

It really is. If we are honest, we have to recognize some criticism of Jesus that lives in our hearts also. And Jesus tells these stories for us, not just the long-ago Pharisees.

A sheep gets lost. A shepherd leaves his other ninety-nine sheep and searches for the lost one. He finds it, returns home in joy, and gathers friends to celebrate.

A coin gets lost. A woman lights a lamp and sweeps like a tornado searching for it. She finds it, and calls to her friends to join her in celebration.

Then Jesus says that God is like the shepherd; God is like the woman. God looks for the lost. God finds them—and there's such joy that you need a party of angels to celebrate.

These stories are upsetting when we think of ourselves as the Pharisees! We're there with the ninety nine sheep, which the shepherd has callously left in danger, to go off for the dumb lost one! Are we even invited to the party to celebrate the joy of discovery? AND, we're told, there is MORE joy over that lost sheep, the lost coin, than over the ones that never got lost. Does that mean that God loves US less?

NO, God doesn't love us less. God's joy over the Pharisees is no less than over the sinners. How can this be? It's simple. We are ALL lost. We are ALL in need of repentance. No one is exempt. God leaves EVERYTHING to look for EACH of us. **We all have our turn.**

We will be outraged along with the Pharisees as long as we cling to our vision of ourselves as "UNLOST". God is telling us something this morning: "My friend, my child, you are lost."

Now, I don't think that's a criticism. It's just a statement of fact, in my opinion. We are lost. We are not perfect. We do wrong. Every day. Even though we have committed ourselves to Christ, even if we have accepted Jesus as our Savior, we are still flawed and we still sin. We leave undone things God would have us do, and we do plenty of things that grieve the heart of God. We are lost. This is just the truth.

We mostly hear this as a criticism, however. And we respond in one of our two ways—maybe flipping back and forth between them:

We agree that we're lost--- and are plunged into despair and shame, convinced that nothing can ever restore us to wholeness. We are slimy worms and that's all there is to say.

OR--- we can't buy that we're lost in any way. We're just fine, thank you.

Jesus' stories for us are good news in both cases. First, they tell us there is no such thing as being lost beyond finding. NO SUCH THING. God seeks. God finds. God's joy is great.

Second, there aren't any ninety-nine sheep that God abandons, because there are no people who do not need to repent. God seeks us all, because we are ALL lost sheep, lost coins.

As long as we deny our flaws, and cling to self-righteousness, we can't know the joy of being found! If we won't even admit we're lost, we can't feel the shepherd carrying us on his shoulders, the woman lifting us skyward in delight.

I invite you today to discover a new peace as you hear criticism. Of course, we will hear it. It's often justified and true! We ARE imperfect and need to keep growing, changing, turning around to follow Christ along paths we were avoiding or blind to. But when we hear criticism we don't need to wallow in shame. Nor do we need to defend ourselves, pretending we are always right. We're not. We get lost. But that's okay, because God is always there seeking.

Trust in God. Rejoice in the finding that will happen today, in your life, and in the lives of your brothers and sisters!

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THIS WEEK- we are beginning "The Grand Sweep" which will guide us through the reading of the entire Bible in one year. Many of us would admit without hesitation that we feel "lost" when it comes to the Bible! Lost in the sense of not knowing what it contains, how to navigate it, how to understand it. This coming Saturday morning there will be two sessions on "Reading the Bible" led by our Associate Pastor, Bromleigh McCleneghan. From 8:30-9:30 she will meet with all interested older youth and adults; from 9:30-11 a.m. she will meet with kids in grades 3-6. Pick up "Grand Sweep" books in Baker Hall, and start reading GENESIS today!!