

Provoked by the Parables at Brentwood Presbyterian

The Lost Sheep

August 28, 2011

**Psalm 26:1-8 and Luke 15:1-7
(Hymns – 34, 374, 706, 497)**

Yet again, we find Jesus in the midst of controversy.
There is something about the presence of God
that stirs people up,
in the best of ways and the worst of ways.

This controversy, as is often the case in the Gospels,
is with the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law.
In this incident, their response to Jesus is not an outright challenge.
It's more grumbling in the background,
shaking their heads in disgust,
raising their eyebrows in derision,
muttering disagreements loud enough to be heard.

To be fair, Jesus did rub them the wrong way.
To be true to himself, and to his understanding of God,
he couldn't help it.
They taught and practiced
a studied and intensely debated interpretation of the Law,
broaching little questioning from outside their own ranks.
Their name – Pharisees – literally means “set apart,”
and they took that to mean set apart by their rightness and purity.

They frequently clashed
with the more priestly, temple-oriented, and elitist Saducees.
When the Temple was destroyed the the Romans,
the Pharisees gained greater influence
as the synagogues came to the fore in preserving Jewishness
in a world dominated by Greek and Roman culture.
And remember, the Gospels are all compiled
after the Temple is destroyed and the Pharisees increased their power.

Several scholars are convinced that Jesus himself
was trained as a Pharisee.
I think that's highly possible.
Certainly, the apostle Paul was a Pharisee prior to his conversation.

Both Jesus and Paul knew the Law well
and had profound respect for the God it revealed
and the disciplines of life that it encouraged.

But they saw a different God through the Law than did the Pharisees.
That's what this parable is all about.

The grumbling of the Pharisees in this encounter
is about who Jesus chooses to hang out with – the outcasts.
The Greek word here – *hamartolos* or sinner - points to those who are
intellectually and morally inferior.

These outcasts do not meet
the purity and respectability standards of the Pharisees.
They are to be judged and rejected.
That is what God does and how God is
for the Pharisees.
Come apart with us and be with God.
Otherwise, you are damned.

But in the parable,
God goes running after the sinner.
That's the difference for Jesus.
The God who Jesus follows and embodies
pursues people lost in their sin.
He goes seeking them out until he finds them.
His generosity and compassion is patient and persistent.
And when he brings them home,
he invites everyone to the party to celebrate.

It's a stark contrast Jesus paints in this parable.
The Pharisees wait in their purity for sinners to come to them.
Jesus goes out into the streets to meet them with respect and compassion,
inspiring them by his presence and purpose
to recognize their need for what Jesus has –
intimacy with God and joy in that way of being.

There are a number of lessons
for today's church in that contrast –
set apart in purity or pursuing with purpose.
I want to focus for just a moment on the purpose of the pursuit.
We've got two more 'lose and pursuit' stories
from this chapter in Luke in the next couple of weeks,
so we'll have a chance to draw some other insights
from this theme in Jesus' stories
in early September.

The primary lesson that struck me this week is this:
for the church to be faithful,
we need to be actively seeking to connect with the lost –
those who are alienated from their intimacy with God,
from their awareness that God is at the centre of their being,
that God is the source of all flourishing in their lives.

The purpose of that connection is to invite them to come home,
invite them enter in the joy of that relationship,
invite them become a conscious contributor in God's kingdom project.

It is out there in the community, in the neighbourhood,
in the midst of those who have lost their awareness of God's loving presence,
that the work of the church bears its fruit.

What we do when we are together –
in worship, in learning, in fellowship –
is crucial empowerment for who we are for others –
in our families, in our workplaces, in our community organizations.

We grow in our intimacy with God, with each other, with our true selves
in order to be the friends of Jesus Christ for others
who may have lost touch with God.
We'll take a closer look next week
at where human beings get lost –
in fear, in despair, in loneliness.

This week I think we should celebrate that God has found us,
whether we are aware of it or not.
In and through Jesus Christ, God has rescued us from ourselves
and brought us home to great celebration.

Faithfulness for a congregation like this
is to let the joy of that intimacy with God
spill over into this neighbourhood in everything we do,
let the joy of this intimacy with God infect us so deeply
that the Spirit can use our enthusiasm to draw others into this community
to worship, to learn, to enjoy fellowship, and to go out to serve.