

September 11, 2022  
Luke 15:1-10

Pentecost 14  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“The Company You Keep”**

“Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The workers who built the numerous houses in my childhood neighbourhood left behind great quantities of scrap lumber which my friends and I eagerly scooped up. At first, we had no idea what to do with it, until someone suggested that we build a clubhouse. We immediately got to work, raiding our fathers' workshops for tools and nails and constructing what was probably the ugliest structure ever built. To our eyes, however, it was the Taj Mahal, a place for us to hang out, trade baseball cards, eat candy we bought at the corner store without our mothers finding out we were “ruining our appetites” before supper, and enjoying the exclusivity of our new club. All of this was threatened, however, when some of our classmates from another neighbourhood came by and wanted to join our club. I would like to tell you that we were magnanimous and welcoming, but that would not be the truth; instead, we turned them away, not wanting to associate with anyone who was not “one of us.” The most vocal member of our group went as far as to tell them that “you know, they say you are known by the company you keep – and we don't want to keep company with you!”

*“You are known by the company you keep”* is the mantra of any club or organization that seeks to be exclusive, turning away anyone who is not deemed “acceptable.” It refers to the desire to spend time with people who are like us, who have the same character and moral standards as those one chooses to surround oneself. The phrase dates to Aesop's Fables and continues to define the human trait to associate oneself with those with whom we feel comfortable, those who are like us.

The desire to be known by “the company you keep” was very important to the Pharisees and scribes who scornfully look upon Jesus and the company he keeps in today's Gospel lesson. Luke reports that among the large crowds who were attracted to Jesus were *“all the tax collectors and sinners [who] were coming near to listen to him”* (15:1). “Tax collectors” were not civil servants who worked by government agencies like Canada Revenue; they were a despised group of individuals considered traitors because they collected taxes for the Roman Empire and were notoriously dishonest; Jesus would later encounter a man in Jericho named Zacchaeus who *“was*

*a chief tax-collector and was rich*” (19:2). The “sinners” who were in Jesus’ presence would have included not only persons who broke the moral laws but also those who did not maintain the ritual purity practiced by the Pharisees; they had raised an objection to Jesus about his disciples, asking “*why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.*” (Matthew 15:2). The religious leaders of the people are scandalized because Jesus chooses to keep company with people who are considered sinful and unclean; if one is to be known by “the company you keep,” then how can Jesus be considered a true teacher of the people if he chooses to welcome and associate with such unrighteous people? They are scandalized because “*Jesus received such outcasts, shared table fellowship with them, and even played host to them.*” (Alan Culpepper).

Jesus is aware of the criticisms of the Pharisees and scribes; but instead of answering them directly, he chooses to respond with three parables that are linked together by the words “lost” (*apollymi*) and “found” (*heurisko*). He has heard the “murmuring” of the Pharisees as they object to his actions, a reaction that is like the complaining of the people of Israel in the wilderness against Moses (“*Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD.*” – Exodus 16:8) and had been voiced earlier in Luke when “*the Pharisees and scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’*” (5:30).

- “Jesus speaks to a group of people who resent his inclusive welcome to all, especially tax collectors and sinners. They are focused on how Jesus’ attention on those deemed undeserving undermines his authority in their view. He responds to their criticism with a parable that shifts the focus to the expectations of those in authority to seek the lost, and the joy experienced when the lost one is returned to community.” – Kendra A. Mohn.

In the two parables in today’s Gospel lesson (the third parable is the well-known parable of the Prodigal Son), what was lost belonged to the owner from the start, but in both stories the owner expends diligent effort to recover the one lost possession. His first words to his opponents are “*Which one of you ...*” (15:4), calling on the Pharisees and scribes to identify with the role of a concerned shepherd; “*Jesus appeals to their sense of obligation and caregiving associated with leadership while simultaneously establishing his own authority as seeker of the lost.*” (Mohn). The first parable describes a shepherd who has lost one of the one hundred sheep in his charge. The image of a shepherd was well-known in the Hebrew Scriptures; in Isaiah, God is described as Israel’s shepherd: “*He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather his lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the*

*mother sheep.*” (Isaiah 40:11). The image of the Lord as shepherd appears frequently in the Psalms, including the most beloved of all Psalms that declares that “*the LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want ...*” (Psalm 23:1) and in Ezekiel who proclaims that the Lord will “*seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.*” (Ezekiel 34:16). In both testaments, the shepherd served as an image of the religious leaders of the people, leaders who at times, like hired hands, did not serve the flock well:

- “The word of the LORD came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them – the shepherds: Thus says the LORD GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?” – Ezekiel 34:1-2.
- “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the world snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.” – John 10:11-13.

In Jesus’ time, shepherds had acquired a bad reputation as shiftless, thieving, trespassing hirelings. Shepherding was listed among the despised trades by the rabbis along with camel drivers, sailors, gamblers with dice, dyers, and tax collectors. The Pharisees’ estimate of shepherds has a particular force in this context, since Jesus responds to their criticism over his acceptance of tax collectors and sinners by telling a story that casts God in the role of a shepherd.

The shepherd in Jesus’ parable may be described as reckless, leaving behind the vast majority of his flock to search for one lost sheep; but it describes the Lord as a shepherd who cares for all of his people, a God whose love for all is so great that God will not accept the loss of even one of God’s beloved. This shepherding God so loves all of his creatures that “*when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices*” (15:5), and then calls together the entire community, inviting them to “*rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost*” (15:6). The response of the shepherd to finding the lost sheep and the invitation for others to join in the celebration is followed by Jesus’ announcement that “*just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.*” (15:7). The joy in heaven characterized God’s celebration of the repentance of one who has gone astray. By implication, Jesus’ action in accepting sinners and eating with them reflects God’s gracious spirit toward

those who were held in contempt by the Pharisees and scribes. The parable poses a double scandal for the scribes and Pharisees; not only are they reminded of the biblical image of God as a shepherd but also that God takes more delight with a repentant sinner than with the “righteous” one – like the Pharisees and scribes. Their so-called “righteousness” does not make God rejoice. The celebration of the coming of the Kingdom of God was taking place in Jesus’ table fellowship with the outcasts, but because their righteousness had become a barrier separating them from these outcasts, they were missing it.

- “The parable is a response to critics who find in the presence of tax collectors and sinners around Jesus something contradictory, or inappropriate, or unsavory, or repulsive, or socially disruptive, or in violation of the nature and purpose of true religion . . . Jesus invites even his critics to join him and all of heaven in celebration of finding the lost. Finding and restoring the lost gives pleasure to God as well as to all who are about God’s business.” – Fred Craddock.

The second parable centers on a woman who has lost one of her ten “silver coins.” A *drachma* was a silver coin worth about a denarius, a day’s wage. Hence, ten drachmas would not have been a great sum of money; but even the loss of one of these coins is as unacceptable to the woman as was the loss of one sheep to the shepherd. She is as diligent as that shepherd; she lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches diligently until she has found it. Her reaction when the lost coin is found is also similar: “*When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that was lost.’*” (15:9). Jesus again calls his critics to understand that “*just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*” (15:10). In both parables, rejoicing calls for celebration; the parables aim not at calling the “sinners” to repentance but at calling the “righteous” to join the celebration. “Whether one will join the celebration is all-important because it reveals whether one’s relationships are based on merit or mercy: “*Those who find God’s mercy offensive cannot celebrate with the angels when a sinner repents. Thus they exclude themselves from God’s grace.*” (Culpepper).

Jesus’ parables speak of our Lord who is truly known by “the company he keeps.” Christians believe that Jesus Christ is “*fully God, begotten of the Father in eternity*” (*Small Catechism*); but he is the God who chose to humble himself so that he might associate with all who have strayed so that he might be Saviour of all. In his letter

to the Philippians, Paul quotes a hymn of the early church that speaks of the choice Christ made so that he might keep company with those he desires to rescue:

- “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but humbled himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” – Philippians 2:5-11.

Jesus chose to be known by “the company he keeps”; he chose to associate with sinful humanity, a humanity that had turned its back on God to the point where it was impossible for them to return to the Lord by their own understanding or strength. It was the sinful condition of humanity that all persons share; as Paul states in his letter to the Romans, “*there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23). Even those who considered themselves among the “righteous” will discover that none of us can return to the Lord by ourselves, for “*all we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way*” (Isaiah 53:6). But as the shepherd diligently searched for the lost sheep who could not find its way back to the fold by itself, “*God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8). Our Lord chose to keep company with us even while we were sinners, while we had turned our backs on God and proved ourselves to be faithless, because even “*if we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.*” (2 Timothy 2:13). The love of God that is ours in Jesus Christ is a love that is “*so amazing, so divine,*” the love through which we are “*justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ... For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.*” (Romans 3:24, 28).

- “Therefore, the sum of the gospel is this: The kingdom of Christ is a kingdom of grace and mercy, in which there is never anything but carrying. Christ bears our griefs and infirmities. He takes our sins upon himself and is patient when we fall. We always rest on his shoulders, and he never tires of carrying us, which should be the greatest comfort to us when we are tempted to sin.” – Martin Luther.

If a person is known by “the company you keep,” then all of us are known as the beloved children of God who were rescued by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ when we had strayed, when in our sinful human condition, we were as lost as the sheep who was found by the faithful shepherd. The church is the community of the rescued, of persons who once “*were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.*” (1 Peter 2:25). As we have been brought together into this community of those who once were lost but now have been found and gathered by our Good Shepherd, our call is to realize that the Church is not a place from which any should be excluded or turned away, for it is Christ’s Church and our Lord has chosen to keep company with us – we who once were lost but now are found, who once were blind but now we see.

- “I cannot moderate my definition of grace, because the Bible forces me to make it as sweeping as possible. God is ‘the God of all grace,’ in the apostle Peter’s words. And grace means there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less. It means that I, even I who deserve the opposite, am invited to take my place at the table in God’s family.” – Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*

Our clubhouse did not last long; it turned out that we were very poor builders, and the first strong windstorm reduced it to rubble. Looking back, it was best that it did not survive, because the only purpose it served was to exclude others whose company for some reason we did not want to keep. Institutions that seek to exclude others only serve to divide what God desires to unite – and this especially applies to the church, which sadly has too often been a place from which many have felt excluded or unwelcome. If we are to be known by “the company you keep,” then we always need to identify with the one who is the Head of the Church, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who chose to keep company with sinful humanity, who chose to seek out the lost and bring the outcasts into the fold, so that we all may know that amazing grace that saved even a wretch like me, one who is a beloved child of God who seeks out the lost and rejoices when they are found. May we always be known by the company we keep, a church of sinners redeemed by our Lord who keeps company with us and desires that all who are lost may be found and returned to the place where we will dwell in the presence of our gracious God forever.

Amen.