

“Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners”

The three parables of this week’s lectionary reading from the Gospel of Luke constitute Jesus’s response to the Pharisees and the scribes, who were grumbling amongst themselves saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them” (15:2). If Jesus was truly the Messiah of God, the fulfillment of Israel’s hopes and expectations, then why would he associate with sinners? Should not Jesus of all people know better what the Holy Law demands of the actions of the righteous? The telling of these three parables forms Jesus’s response to the grumbling of the righteous and in so doing point to a defining mark of Jesus’s preaching: God’s love and God’s mercy exceed the boundaries that we create and perform through mechanisms of exclusion. When the Law functions to condemn and exclude those deemed “undesirable” by the righteous, it turns against itself and it turns against its source in the love and mercy of God. Each of the three parables in their own ways point to the excessiveness of God’s mercy and the abundance of God’s love beyond merely human conceptions of what is just and right. Jesus’s response to the Pharisees and the scribes strikes me as but an explication of what the apostle Paul means in Romans 8, when he says “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38-39). It is this love and this mercy that extends even to the lost, to the one who has gone missing. God’s mercy is unbounded. And when it is set loose in our world, the boundaries and borders that separate and divide us from one another and from God, that keep us from seeing the other as beloved by God and worthy of mercy, are overcome.

The first parable that Jesus tells is known to us as the parable of the lost sheep. Jesus appeals to those in the crowd with at least some experience of shepherding. “Which one of you,” he inquires, “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?” We can assume that those who consider themselves righteous and obedient would see themselves among the ninety-nine. They are the sheep who have not strayed beyond the pasture. They have remained steadfast in their obedience to the shepherd. They are righteous and good and do not need to repent. They are well-trained. They do not leave the fold. But Jesus also asks those who would count themselves among the righteous ninety-nine to consider the perspective of the shepherd who cares for every sheep. Does not the care of a good shepherd extend beyond simply those who follow the “rules” as it were? And when the shepherd finds this one sheep does he not also lay the sheep on his shoulders and rejoice and is this not to be celebrated? Celebration over the extension of this kind of care to every single individual is what “heaven” looks like, according to Jesus. God’s mercy is unbounded.

Or, for those who are not familiar with shepherding, Jesus tells another parable, this time about a woman who lost a coin. We know that women were among the earliest followers of Jesus, and we can assume here that women were among those in the crowd about whose presence with Jesus, the Pharisees and the scribes were also annoyed. Jesus not only dined with tax collectors and sinners, but associated with women whom he regarded as among those worthy of fellowship. “What woman having ten silver coins,” Jesus asks, “if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?” And when she finds the lost coin she rejoices and calls all around to come together, her friends and neighbors, to celebrate that the lost coin has been found. And again, Jesus says, this is what “heaven” looks like; when the one who was lost has been found there is “joy in the presence of the angels of God.” So, too, no one is regarded as disposable for Jesus. God loves every single individual without exception, and especially those who are regarded as unlovable, undesirable, and not worth our time. It’s just one coin, after all. Nonsense. The kingdom of God is precisely for that one coin regarded as worthless by any earthly measure.

Some of you may already know this, but I am a pretty huge Lady Gaga fan. I am proudly what you might call one of her “little monsters.” Several years back, Lady Gaga released her “Born this Way” record, which was incredibly controversial, at least in some Christian circles, for the way it affirmed LGBTQ people with its basic message, “Baby, I was born this way!” and for its song “Judas.” When Gaga went on tour, she was met with hundreds of Christian protesters with signs condemning queer people as sinful and anti-God. In response, one night Gaga came out with fake blood all over her body and she began to reference the

hatred of the protesters outside the stadium, and then she began to scream, “Jesus loves every single one of you; Jesus loves every single one of you,” she repeated over and over again. It’s an extremely powerful video, if you can find it on YouTube. And it points to this truth: God’s love extends beyond the walls that the righteous create for themselves in order to keep people they view undesirable on the outside.

Finally, Jesus turns to the third parable, the one about the prodigal son. The story is familiar to us. A father with two sons. The younger son asks for his property; the father obliges by dividing the property between the two sons. Now, according to the laws of the Roman Empire, the two sons would have been able to live off the family estate during their father’s lifetime, but the property would generally have remained in the father’s hands until his death. By law, after the father’s death, the older son would have inherited two-thirds of the property, and the remaining third would have been divided among the heirs. So, the youngest son’s request to have the property divided now would have been very irregular and deeply disrespectful. It amounted to his treating his father as if he were already dead. Yet, the father’s compliance with the request is noted simply: “So he divided his property between them” (15:12c). By contrast, the younger son’s downfall is described in slow motion. The country to which he travels is “distant,” the property is “squandered,” his lifestyle described as “dissolute,” and when famine strikes, the younger son finds himself among the poor, so desperate that he becomes a farm worker on someone else’s estate. The depth of his desperation is seen in that he not only cares for the pigs, he actually envies their food! The Pharisees and scribes in Jesus’ audience would have regarded this as a particularly dismal fate, as pigs were regarded as “unclean.”

When the younger son realizes what he had squandered and left behind, he sets off to return home and goes to his father and while he is still far off, the father sees him and is “filled with compassion,” and he runs to him and puts his arms around him and kisses him. As the son begins to ask for forgiveness, the father seems to cut the speech short, accepting the son and commanding his servants to put a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet and to prepare a feast to celebrate the son’s arrival home. If the parable had ended here, the father’s compassion would be an obvious corrective to the grumbling Pharisees and scribes. It would seem that Jesus is saying that just as the father recognizes the value of this repentant sinner so too the grumblers should accept the tax collectors and sinners who gather around Jesus. But the story does not end here, because the man had *two* sons.

The second son returns from nearby fields to the house that is by now full of celebration and feasting. A servant explains to the son what has happened. The older son responds with anger and refuses to join in on the celebrations. Just as the father had run out to meet the younger son a few verses earlier, so now he runs out to see the older son. The older son responds, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”

By the usual criteria of justice and fairness, the older son has a point, right? I mean, his younger brother not only took his share of the estate early but he wasted it. In the meantime, the older son had worked hard and had remained faithful. His brother’s return would have cost him more than just the calf prepared for dinner, it would have cost him the other half of the estate. But the father’s response seems to indicate a different perspective, one that can rejoice in the presence of both sons. The love and obedience of the older son is a treasured fact of the father’s life. Listen, the father says turning to the older son, “you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

The Pharisees and the scribes grumbling is mirrored in the complaints of the older son who simply cannot believe that such a celebratory party would be held for such a lousy sinner. One can imagine how this would have made the “righteous” among the crowd feel. Come on, Jesus, this is unfair! Does not the extension of mercy and grace to the “lost sheep” and the “lost coin” and the “lost son” come at the expense of those of us who are righteous? Are *we* not valued too? Come on, Jesus, why this preferential treatment? Don’t *all* lives matter! It would seem, though, that such a response would be a misunderstanding of the parables that depends on a view of God’s love as scarce, rather than abundant; and it is informed by a view of grace as bounded, rather than unbounded. God’s mercy cannot be fenced in! The Pharisees and the scribes are caught up in a kind of “zero-sum” way of thinking of God’s love. They think that the resources for love and fellowship must be doled out according to their standards of justice. But what they apparently fail to recognize is that God’s love is defined primarily by its radical abundance

and universality, that is to say, by its excessive unboundedness. The fellowship and love of Jesus is not only for “insiders” and for the law-abiding. It is not only for the upstanding citizen or good Christian. We might say that the piety of the Pharisees and the scribes have turned God into a kind of referee, who doles out love and mercy only to those who consider themselves among the righteous. But what we see in the parables is that God’s love and mercy does not operate according to these rules; those who would think of themselves as the righteous over and against the sinner cannot escape God’s critical judgment nor are they given special access to God’s love. Instead, God’s love is so abundant and so free that it breaks open all divisions, all walls, everything that would keep people from eating with another. This is the good news of the gospel embodied in Jesus: God’s love knows no limits, comes especially to those in need -- “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38-39). So let us rejoice, prepare a feast, and invite sinners and saints alike; for God’s love is not scarce, but abundant and free!