

They say that if you lie down with dogs, you wake up with fleas. They also say that you can judge someone's character by the company they keep. Many a newly sober person is counseled to keep away from their old friends, lest they be tempted to engage in old behaviors. Good advice when we are trying to break harmful habits. Generally speaking, these truisms reflect the collective wisdom on the ways of the world. They help us understand how to act or how to be - they help us make judgments, keeping smooth our social interactions. So it isn't a surprise that in today's Gospel, the religious leaders are scandalized by the company Jesus keeps.

Put yourself in their place and with their observations. They see a man who is obviously knowledgeable about Jewish Scripture and Jewish Law. They see his deep faith in God as well as the numerous healings he performs. They see a charismatic man to whom many are drawn. How then, can this obviously holy man have such an unorthodox approach to understanding scripture and hang out with such disreputable people? Part of their jobs in the pharisaical sect is to ensure that the law is followed and that observant Jews remain ritually pure. Ritual purity helps Jews know who's in and who's out; who they can touch, what they can eat, and what discipline they demonstrate as part of their devotion to God. They can't

wrap their minds around Jesus's actions - for them, a total oxymoron. No wonder they murmur.

At the beginning of every year, the Style section of the Washington Post devotes its front page to who or what is "in" and who are what is now "out." I don't know who the arbiters of who is "in" or who is "out" are, but its fun to read and I can pretend to be up on the latest trends. I usually don't remember the contents of the list beyond a few days and it has no real relevance to my life - its just fun. For the devoted Pharisees and Scribes, however, who is "in" and who is "out" is serious business, for they understand it to matter to God.

Jesus has a different understanding, a bold view that demonstrates just how expansive is the reach of God's love. So he tells the Pharisees and the scribes three parables, two of which we heard this morning. Jesus starts with common ground that he shares with the Pharisees for both of them view the tax collectors and sinners as "lost" and both will understand the lost sheep and the lost coin to be representative of the tax collectors and sinners.<sup>1</sup> It would have been understood by all that the shepherd and the woman are metaphors for God. As the parables unfold however, the

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<sup>1</sup> Charles B. Cousar, "Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year C vol 4*, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2010, 73.

Pharisees will become astonished at what they hear, for they understand the lost as beyond redemption and Jesus understands the lost as beloved of God and necessary for the community to be whole. Not only are these lost beloved by God, they are treasured and God is bereft without them, so Jesus demonstrates that God does all in God's power to search them out and find them. Once found, there is so much joy that heaven parties hearty. Jesus is inviting the Pharisees to share in and participate in that joy and celebration. To the extent that they can participate reveals whether they understand our relationships as based upon merit or based upon mercy. If they chose merit, are they excluding themselves from God's grace?

All of us, at one point or another, are part of the righteous - part of a group that excludes, part of a group that feels justified in remaining separate and above those "others." Some of those who are permanently ostracized in our culture are those who have served time in prison or jail. Some states, like Virginia, legally continue to punish former convicts who have fully paid their debt to society by permanently restricting their ability to participate in public life through the vote unless they petition the Governor for the restoration of that right. Two of Virginia's recent governors have

done more to restore voting rights of former convicts than any of their predecessors. Plenty of the “righteous,” including many Commonwealth Attorneys are grumbling. The current governor appears to be offering blanket restoration and through the marvels of technology, restoring voting rights en masse, in keeping with a state Supreme Court judgment that each petition be individually signed. The General Assembly is once again suing the Governor. Now both sides ascribe political motives damaging to the other side. This is probably true. Imagine, however, how it feels to those former prisoners who have recently obtained the franchise. In our system of government, voice is trying to be given to the voiceless. With a few stipulations, the right to vote is been restored primarily through mercy and not by merit. And this just doesn’t sit right with some people.

I provide this example because it makes me uncomfortable - I am easily part of the righteous in this instance and I can easily see the point that those who have broken the civil contract with society *should* earn back our trust. In other words, what’s so wrong with merit? Having volunteered with Offender Aid and Restoration I know that mercy is not readily available from employers, landlords and family members to those who have been imprisoned. I see the prisoners in our parables this morning. Jesus most

surely would be hanging out with them. They are among the lost. They embody the struggle of forced separation and the struggle to return. They are the lost sheep, they are the lost coin, they are the sinners and tax collectors. In their situation, they really are completely dependent upon the One who can be counted upon to search them out. Jesus makes a place for them, holds the door open, welcomes them home because Jesus knows that those on the fringes of our society are integral to all a community can be as we work toward becoming the Kingdom of God. Jesus is modeling a hospitality that seeks to forgive and restore everyone to a place within the heart of the community.

In as much as we have been the righteous, we are also part of the “tax collectors and sinners” group. We too have been lost, have struggled and suffered. The vast majority of us has gone through a “dark night of the soul,” and may have been in a valley so deep that even our very faith seems lost. There is hope for us in this passage for even if we profess no faith, even if we cannot find any evidence of the existence of God, you can be sure that God is searching for you. Furthermore, God WILL find you. All you have to do is to be willing to turn toward God and God will do the rest. Paul offers his own testimony in today’s letter to Timothy - he was lost and

God found him! He never tired of telling his story and his audience never tired of hearing it. And in that moment when we turn toward God, when we allow ourselves to be found by God, there is celebration like no other. Being offered “salvation” is allowing ourselves to be drawn into the celestial celebration<sup>2</sup>, singing, dancing, laughing, being filled with joy. Feel that joy this morning when Erich and Rachel and the rest of the choir sing “He never failed me yet” because Jesus is never going to fail us. That, my friends, is Good News.

AMEN.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.