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C: 14th Sunday after Pentecost / Lectionary 24/ Proper 19
Exodus 32:7-14, I Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10

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Salem, Bridgeport

“I Once Was Lost but Now Am Found”

*“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus].
And the Pharisees & the scribes were grumbling & saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners & eats with them!”*”

They were at it again...those scribes and Pharisees...grumbling –
grumbling that Jesus was welcoming tax collectors and sinners,
and not just welcoming them, but EATING with them!
You can just imagine the irritation and frustration Jesus must have felt.
How many times had he made it clear that all of those rules
that separated people, that divided them, that put up walls between them were wrong?!
He had come not just to fulfill God’s promise to the Jewish people, but to save ALL people!

The Jewish religion had become a club,
a club centered on its own survival, a club concerned about its rights and rituals and rules,
a club that had lost its spiritual foundation, its inner vitality, its source of life.
And those in charge of the club, those in charge of the religious institution, those in power
could no longer see how lost they were.
They could no longer see that they were sinners, that they were unrighteous, that they were unclean.
Their ears were stopped to what Jesus was saying,
their eyes blind to what Jesus was doing,
their minds closed to understanding what Jesus was teaching,
and their hearts hard to the life-transforming love Jesus was offering.

We, of course, can see what the scribes and Pharisees were not seeing, but that’s because we are reading this
already knowing that it is the scribes & Pharisees who are cast as the villains in the story.
We can see what they could not see because we stand outside of their group – in time and space.
But they, of course, could not see.

They simply grumbled once again that he was associating with tax collectors and sinners,
that he was choosing to spend his time not with them, the scribes and Pharisees,
the good people, the righteous people,
but with that group of people over and against whom they identified,
the tax collectors and sinners, the bad people, the unrighteous people.
Jesus is not welcoming them the good people; he’s welcoming “those” people.
He is not having dinner with them the righteous people; he’s having dinner with “those” people.

And of course he was!
Why would he want to spend his time with people who weren’t open to what he was saying
when he could spend time with people who hung on his every word?
Why would he want to spend his time with people who were grumbling and complaining
when he could spend his time with people who were excited & thrilled & full of laughter & joy?
Why would he want to spend time with people who confined themselves to their own narrow circles
when he could spend time with people who were eager to learn from those who were different?

Jesus had already told these things to the scribes and Pharisees on countless occasions,
and yet they still didn’t get it.
So this time Jesus doesn’t confront them directly but takes a different tact.

This time he tells a story, a story about how the shepherd (Jesus) leaves the flock (the religious community) and goes after someone outside that fold (a sinner) and when he finds that wandering sheep, he grabs it up in love, lifts it onto his shoulders, and carries it back rejoicing.
Now remember that a parable is meant, not to be analyzed in all the details, but to convey a basic truth, And the basic truth here is that it was in his ministry to tax collectors and sinners that Jesus found joy!

“Just so, I tell you”, says Jesus, “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

It’s pretty obvious that here Jesus is referring to the scribes and Pharisees as the people who “need no repentance”.

But since we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God, this is not so much Jesus’ judgment on the scribes and Pharisees as it is their own self-perception.

It wasn’t that the Pharisees and scribes were bad people; no, they were good people.

They were intelligent and educated and had the best of intentions.

And that was their downfall!

Because it was on their own intelligence, their own knowledge, and their own good intentions that they relied. That was their mistake.

Because we simply can’t rely on our own intelligence or our own education or our own minds to lead us in the way of truth, because our minds are so easily deceived

We are deceived because we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves and that sin is constantly at work in our minds,

telling us that we are right and others are wrong,
telling us that we are smarter than other people,
and telling us that we need to look out for our own interests
and do all we can to maintain power and control.

Every human being, no matter how evil we may judge them, acts out of “good intentions”.

Even somebody like Hitler acted as he thought was right.

The Israelites building a golden calf believed they were doing what was right.

The scribes and Pharisees believed they knew what was right.

The whole reason we have poverty and food insecurity and gun violence and war is because of the structures that we put into place because we thought they were right.

But of course this is how evil deceives us.

When we are commanded to love God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength that means that we must submit our wills to God’s – completely.

It means that our attitude needs to be one, not of pride or arrogance or self-reliance, but of humility as we approach God, saying,

“I have no idea what I’m doing or where I’m going, but I am trusting you to guide me.”

What God wants is for us to open our eyes, open our ears, open our minds, and open our hearts to the NEW things that God is doing and to the NEW things God invites us to do.

Whenever we close ourselves to what God is saying or doing,

whenever we draw boundaries and say we will go here and no farther,
whenever we refuse to let go of rites and rituals and rules that no longer serve love,
then we become the scribes and Pharisees,

we become the Israelites in the wilderness worshiping a golden calf.

And whenever we act like that, we do deserve God’s wrath and Jesus’s repudiation.

And yet there is hope for us still.

All it would have taken for those scribes and Pharisees to become the cause of Jesus’ rejoicing, would have been for them to say, “You know, Jesus, maybe you’re right. Maybe we’ve gotten it wrong. Maybe you have something that we don’t have.

Could we go with you the next time you eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

And then Jesus and all of heaven would have been rejoicing over those scribes and Pharisees.

Did the scribes and Pharisees deserve God's wrath? Of course.

Did the Israelites who began worshipping a golden calf deserve God's wrath? Of course.

Why?

Because they were not listening to God, they were not loving God, and they were not obeying God.

And yet, even though they had disobeyed and God was angry enough to want to punish them,

Moses reminded God not about the people's sin, but about God's own nature.

Moses reminded God that he was a God of love and compassion

and that God had created these people and chosen them and made promises to them,

and that since God was a faithful God, God would need to keep those promises.

And that is the good news for all people –

good news for the Israelites, good news for the scribes and Pharisees, & good news for us –

because even when we are stubborn and arrogant and closed-minded and closed-hearted,

even when we fail to open our eyes or ears or minds or hearts to God,

even when we disobey and deserve God's wrath, all it takes is for us to repent.

All it takes is for us to give up the things that we hold onto more than we hold onto God.

All it takes is for us to give up what we want and do what God wants.

All it takes is for us to let go of our arrogance and pride.

All it takes is for us to admit that we are lost

for God to find us, grab us, and lift us up and carry us home with rejoicing.

It's like Paul wrote in our second lesson for today:

*"I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord...because he...appointed me to his service,
even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.*

But...because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with...faith & love....

Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the foremost.

But for that very reason I received mercy...making me an example,,,,"

I don't know about you, but when Jesus looks at me

I don't want him to see me as the arrogant Saul but as the repentant Paul.

I don't want him to see me as a scribe or Pharisee but as a tax collector or sinner,

I don't want him to see one who sees herself as righteous, but as lost.

And I don't just want to know in my head that I am lost in theory,

but I want to feel that actual lost-ness in my heart,

because I know that it is only when I can actually feel the pain of the lost-ness,

that will I be able to feel the unimaginable joy of being found.

What about you? Are you one of the righteous religious people

who have no need to change their beliefs or their attitudes or their actions

or are you one who is eager to have Jesus open your eyes and ears and mind and heart?

Are you one who wants church to stay the same or go back to the way it used to be

or are you one who can't wait to see how God is creating a new church

that is beyond anything you can even imagine?

Are you one who is content with the relationships you already have,

or are you one who can't wait to meet the new and different people God wants you to know?

Are you one who has never known the fear or pain or being lost,

or are you one who knows the exquisite unimaginable joy of being found?

Each of us has a choice.

We can be the scribes and sinners who grumble about what Jesus is up to,

or we can be the tax collectors and sinners who Jesus chooses to spend time with

I know what I choose. I hope you choose the same.

Because it's when we admit we are lost that we can be found.

And it's when we are found that there will be joy. Amen