

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost • September 15, 2019

Exodus 32:7-14 • Psalm 51:1-10 • 1 Timothy 1:12-17 • Luke 15:1-10

In the world of the Pharisees, there were clear boundaries. These are the insiders. These are the outsiders. These are the people who belong. These are the people who don't belong. Scribes? In. Tax collectors? Out. Mothers? In. Prostitutes? Out.

In fact, the word "Pharisee" comes from the Hebrew root for "to separate." We don't know if the Pharisees gave themselves that designation or if someone else ascribed it to them, but the point stands either way. The Pharisees saw themselves as removed from, apart from, separated from, everybody else. They were the true keepers of God's law. Other people were not.

Nowhere were those boundaries more evident than at table. You might rub shoulders with all kinds of people in the streets, but when you come to the table, there are rules. Clean and unclean. Permitted and forbidden. A couple of weeks ago we heard the story about the Pharisees who fight over the seating arrangement, arguing over who has the most honor. But even to have the lowest seat at the Pharisees' table was to have some degree of respectability. There were many people who weren't in the room at all. People who could never get a seat at their table.

We often view the Pharisees as regressive and closed-minded and legalistic, but we take on their view of the world more often than we like to admit. We think there are certain kinds of people who belong and certain kinds of people who really don't. We create boundaries and norms that say, "These are the kinds of people who are normal, and these are the kinds of people who are deviant."

Today's gospel reading reveals that Jesus doesn't abide by those Pharisaic boundaries. Sometimes Jesus eats with Pharisees. Sometimes he eats with tax collectors. What annoys the Pharisees so much about Jesus, the reason they grumble, is that he seems completely uninterested in the rules and norms they've built. This shouldn't surprise us all that much.

But it turns out it's even more radical than that. Not only does Jesus not abide by their rules and norms. That would be bad enough. No, Jesus seems primarily interested in the people they have pushed out. Jesus isn't just ignoring their rules. Jesus is actively trying to take them apart. That's the part that should get our attention.

Notice that when the Pharisees grumble about Jesus eating with sinners, Jesus doesn't say that he'll eat with anyone. Jesus doesn't say, "I'll eat with anyone who has good food." No, Jesus tells them a parable about a lost sheep. "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine... and go after the one that is lost." Jesus' ethic, his guiding principle, is not necessarily treating everyone the same. Jesus' ethic is to give particular attention, particular emphasis, particular time to the people who are in need.

We often fail to see how provocative this parable about the lost sheep is. Because we never ask why the sheep wandered off by itself. We make it a moralistic tale about a sheep who wanders off on their own volition. *This sheep doesn't know what's good for it, but Jesus will always set off and bring it back. Isn't Jesus nice. Imagine how much Jesus must love the sheep like me who don't wander off.*

But oftentimes the sheep don't just wander off on their own. Sometimes they get pushed out. Sometimes they get sent away by the rest of the flock. We think the problem is the sheep that is off by themselves. When the real problem is that we keep chasing them away. Like the Pharisees in today's story, we create barriers that keep people out and act surprised when they're off by themselves.

Next month, we're going to have a speaker here from St. Paul's in Teaneck named Mimi Confer. Confer is one of the heads of the New Jersey Synod's Ministry to LGBT Persons task force. And she's going to help us think about some ways we can be a more inclusive and welcoming

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congregation. Our synod has another ministry team working with immigrants. Other synods have similar task forces that deal with the particular needs of the Latinx community, military families, people leaving incarceration, people with HIV/AIDS, and people with disabilities. Groups that the church has either explicitly discriminated against or just fallen short of its call to minister to.

There are some people who see that kind of effort and say, “Why do we have to work on serving the needs of this one demographic group? If we’re trying to make this one group feel welcome, doesn’t that mean we’re making everyone else less welcome? Why do we need to start addressing particular groups of people?”

This argument seems reasonable at first. But it only works if you don’t take the time for self-reflection. It only works if you assume the sheep wandered off by itself and you had nothing to do with it. Because the fact is we’ve been addressing particular groups of people for a long, long time. And we’ve been doing it to tell them they don’t belong.

If people are mad that the church identifies specific groups of people to make sure they feel welcome, just imagine how mad they must have been when the church was identifying specific groups of people to keep them out. They must have been furious. They must have been writing letters to the presiding bishop after mass every Sunday. They must have submitted resolution after resolution to synod assembly. They must have been raising hell at their district meetings. But you know what? They never did. Because it just felt normal.

Like the Pharisees in today’s reading, we often don’t even notice when particular kinds of people are excluded. It’s normal. It’s tradition. It’s the way it’s always been. But when Jesus starts to eat with them, when Jesus goes out of his way to make a point of showing them hospitality, suddenly we cry foul. We start grumbling.

Sometimes we like to tell ourselves that we’ve done enough once we’ve stopped keeping people out. We’re not being exclusionary anymore. They’re welcome to come back to the fold whenever they want. We act like history begins anew every time we want a fresh start. As if we can just say, “We’ve changed our position on tax collectors. So if any tax collectors show up that’s fine, but let’s not go out of our way to tell them.”

We often fail to recognize the harm that those policies and norms and structures have caused. We forget that people who have been pushed out or kept on the margins may not be willing to take the risk of showing up without being invited. Making amends, rebuilding trust, creating relationships, and seeking reconciliation is hard work. They take time, they take effort, and, perhaps hardest for us, they require taking accountability for the ways we’ve fallen short in the past. Those things don’t just happen overnight.

This past summer, we commemorated fifty years of female clergy in the ELCA. There was lots of celebration of that milestone, and rightly so. But it also served as a reminder of how long it has taken us to elect women to positions of authority. In theory, women were eligible to become bishops in 1970 when the roster was opened to women. But the first woman to actually be elected as a bishop? April Uring Larson in 1992. Twenty-two years later. The first black and Latinx women to be elected as bishops? Patricia Davenport and Leila Ortiz in 2018. Forty-eight years later.

And you know what people said? They said *Why do we need to talk about the gender or race or ethnicity of the bishop? Why can’t we focus on their skills and abilities?* Okay. But if you never questioned whether we were electing people based on their skills and abilities when the conference of bishops was made up exclusively of straight white men, you’re telling on yourself.

So often, we think that God has a limited amount of grace to go around. And if Jesus spends time with these people, if God welcomes these people, it means that God welcomes me less. Think back to the gospel story. What’s the emotional response the Pharisees have to Jesus eating with the

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marginalized? What do they feel? They're upset. They're offended. But more than that, they're jealous. Because they want Jesus to be eating with them. They have a zero-sum view of the world. They see other people as competition. This time and effort Jesus is putting in over there is taking away from what I'm getting.

But God's love is infinite. It isn't a finite resource that gets drained over time. Jesus loving the marginalized doesn't mean that he loves anyone less. Jesus seeking out the lost sheep doesn't mean that he doesn't care about the other ones. In fact, it's the exact opposite. You see how much he loves them all because of what he will do for just one of them.

When the Pharisees see God reach out to someone on the margins, what do they do? They grumble. They grumble because they say, "That's not me." But what do the people in Jesus' parable do? "When he comes home, he calls together all his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'" They rejoice. Because they see that there's even more love, even more goodness, even more grace in the world.

When we gather around this table and offer our thanks and praise to God, that's what we're celebrating. As our preface puts it, "It is indeed right, our duty *and our joy* that we should at all times offer at all times and in all places give our thanks and praise to you." It is our joy. It is our joy that Jesus keeps gathering us together despite our worst instincts. It is our joy that Jesus keeps loving us across the barriers we build. And it is our joy that Jesus keeps on seeking us out, no matter where we go.

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