September 15, 2013 – 17th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19)

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"All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus." Or how about, "All the drug dealers and gang bangers were coming near to listen to Jesus." Or as one group would have it, "All the socialists and welfare frauds," and as another group would say at the same time, "All the tea-partiers and corporate fat cats." Basically, "All the worst people you can think of, and then the even WORSE people were coming near to hear Jesus."

I don't think Luke necessarily meant that there was a convention of tax collectors following Jesus around, or that the blanket term, "sinners," meant any particular kind of sin. There were certainly a few tax collectors in Jesus' life – his own disciple Matthew being one of them. But tax collectors meant a very specific and bad thing in occupied Palestine at that time. They were, first of all, collaborators with Rome, which didn't win them any popularity contests. And since they got paid a percentage of the tax they collected, and had the power of the Roman military behind them, they were very often extortionists, taking considerably more than the official taxes imposed on the Jews, just to make a buck. Or a lot of bucks.

So the collective term "Tax Collectors and Sinners" meant "Bad People." Specifically, they were Bad People to the Pharisees and the scribes. So once again, Jesus, the Rabbi, was palling around with unsavory and unclean people, in the eyes of the Jewish officials. He was, once again, flouting the Torah, right in front of them. Grumble, grumble, grumble!

And Jesus wasn't merely welcoming these miscreants. The Greek word here is *prosdechomai* which translates as, "to await or expect, to receive or warmly welcome, especially to one's house, or to accept." Jesus' welcome here, of these Bad People, was with enthusiasm and wide open arms. Then, as he usually does in these situations, when the Pharisees complain, he schools them with a couple of parables. Actually, he tells three parables, but the parable of the Prodigal Son is left off here because we have already heard it this year in Lent.

These parables are about things being lost, searched for, found, and rejoiced over. It's only natural to think that the point of the story is the fact that these sinners and tax collectors were lost and now are found, and that the Pharisees, who don't necessarily need finding, should be rejoicing as Jesus is. That's a perfectly valid way to interpret these parables, but I want to look at them slightly differently today.

Today, I want to look at them in terms of the people seeking the lost objects. Both stories end with Jesus saying that there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. Well, the lost things in these stories are not really capable of repenting. One is a dumb animal and one is an inanimate object. The word for repenting here is *metanoia*, which does mean "repentance," but it also means a "change of mind or a change in the inner person." Sheep and silver aren't really capable of having a change of mind or inner person.

And even if we do include the story of the Prodigal Son, he had every intention of repenting to his father, but he never got the chance. The father preempted him by expressing his joy in finding what had been lost to him. That's how all the seekers in these stories react. They are overjoyed that they have found what was lost.

Now think back to the Pharisees and scribes, and their reaction to Jesus welcoming tax collectors and sinners with open arms. They are not rejoicing at all. They are grumbling and crabby. They don't experience any kind of change of mind or inner person. There is no *metanoia* here. You could even say that they are the lost ones here.

How many of us are like those Pharisees and scribes. How many of us pay lip service to Jesus' teachings about caring for the poor and feeding the hungry, but balk at actually talking to a homeless person or hugging a poor child who maybe hasn't had a bath in a while? How many of us love the idea of Jesus welcoming tax collectors and sinners with open arms, but would struggle with opening our homes to a drug addict or street person?

Most of us, I'd guess, and I include myself in that number. "Bad People," however we define them, are frightening to us. Sometimes they smell bad. Sometimes they look funny. Sometimes they behave erratically. But think about it – sometimes WE smell bad, say after a session at the gym; and sometimes WE look funny, like a lot of people did in the Homecoming Parade last week; and sometimes WE behave erratically for any number of perfectly good reasons.

But we're not frightened in these cases because WE know each other. They say familiarity breeds contempt, but I think familiarity actually breeds comfort.

One of the things I helped start in my home parish in Minneapolis was a program called Warm Space. St. Mark's Cathedral is involved in a couple of different feeding programs, one of which is a weekly supper for homeless teens and young adults. Warm Space was conceived as a coffeehouse-like place where these kids could go for a while after dinner, rather than just heading right back out into the night. We were especially thinking about them being on the street in the wintertime when it gets pretty cold in Minnesota. We also offered some helpful services like HIV testing, finding shelters and resources, and some clothes and toiletries. But mostly we wanted to provide sympathetic ears and a ministry of presence.

Let me tell you, I was pretty nervous on that first day. These kids were weird looking and tough. They had all kinds of tattoos and piercings, and they wore punky clothes and did drugs and smelled bad, looked funny, and behaved erratically.

But as the months went by, we got to know them as individuals. We knew their names, their stories, their drugs of choice, their survival methods. We admired their new tattoos and piercings, and witnessed their relationships. We saw their babies grow, because yes, sometimes these homeless children had children of their own. We saw some get out of that way of life, and some fall in even deeper. Some disappeared and we missed them.

I no longer defined them by how they smelled, or how they looked, or how they behaved. They were no longer "Bad People." They were just People – kids in fact – and I was no longer afraid of them. I had been lost in my own prejudice, and now I was found.

How many chances to find and be found do we give up through our own fear and prejudice. We are ALL sinners and tax collectors on some level, and Jesus welcomes us all to his table. We are the sheep of his own fold, lambs of his own flock, and sinners of his own redeeming, as it says in our burial rite. And just as he has embraced us, he encourages us to do the same.

We are called to seek out the lost lambs in our own lives, in our own community. We are called to be the one who sweeps the house thoroughly for that one lost coin. Don't look on the lost sheep as someone else's problem. Don't think, "well, it's only one coin – I can afford not to look for it."

In searching for what is lost, we find ourselves and we experience true repentance and metanoia. And then we find that we have already been sought for and redeemed by our own Shepherd, and that the rejoicing in heaven is for OUR salvation.

To paraphrase: There will be more joy in heaven over one person who goes out to diligently search for the lost, the lonely, the bereft, and the ostracized, than over the 99 who stay safely behind the closed doors of their churches and homes.

Amen.