

Sermon
Rev. Paul Gaffney
September 11, 2016

Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable:

Which one of you, 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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Good morning. It is wonderful to be with you all today. Most of you, by now, know something about my work with the Marin Interfaith Street Chaplaincy, as my primary vocation for the last thirteen years has been serving as a chaplain with people who live outside in this county. While I am shifting my focus a bit these days toward becoming a pastoral educator, my heart is still very much with the people whom I have companioned over the years, and one of my primary motivations for entering into training as a Clinical Pastoral Education Supervisor is to lift up this kind of ministry and invite spiritual leaders in formation into this work. Because I believe in this work as the very heart and soul of ministry, at least as I understand it.

I have heard from many people over the years, "Paul, I could never do what you do." I have heard it from pastors and laypeople and neighbors and friends. I may have even heard it from some of you here in this room today. I have heard people ask, "How do you keep going in the middle of all of that suffering? You've been at this for such a long time...have you seen anything change in a hopeful way?"

See, I think there is something that happens when people hear that I work with homeless people. That phrase “homeless people” just conjures up all kinds of feelings and images in peoples’ hearts and minds.

For just a moment, let those words hang in the air between us – “homeless people” We say a word like “homeless” and each of us has a different set of images and understandings that we relate to that word, depending on our experiences of homeless people.

If you have volunteered in REST, or given time to St. Vincent’s Free Dining Room or attended the Street Chaplaincy’s Thanksgiving Eve Service or a Companionship Workshop, some images and feelings might come up for you that are different from what you remember having before you had those experiences. For instance, that label “homeless,” and what about the label of “sinner”? I know we don’t really like that word around here. What kinds of images come up for you around that word? We don’t like calling other people sinners because of the images that the word sinner evokes. We don’t like being called sinners because of how the word makes us feel.

That word “sinner” cuts deep for some of us, so we don’t use it very much, at least not here. And we can see, perhaps, from our experience of the word “sinner” that the imposition of a label has an effect, a profound effect, because the word “sinner” implies that there is an opposite – that there is such a thing as a righteous person, or one without sin. And it gets used sometimes in not very kind ways by those who believe themselves to be righteous. And some people take on that label of “sinner” and it keeps them feeling miserable and guilty and ashamed. Likewise, the word “homeless” makes reference to this essential thing that so many of us have and still so many people lack, and sometimes it gets used in not very kind ways by those who believe themselves to have a place to call home. And some people take on that label of “homeless” and it keeps them feeling miserable and guilty and ashamed – separate, cut off, like there’s no place to belong. These words hold such power. And I know I forget that from time to time.

When I first met Daryl, it was in the day service center at the Ritter Center. He came right up to me and started right into a very impassioned speech about how Ritter Center and other providers like it have things all wrong. “500 million dollars,” he said, “across this whole country... all that money given to places like this to do what? What kind of help do they give? Just enough to keep us on the bottom... to keep us in our place...where we belong... separate!”

Well, I was kind of taken aback by the whole situation. The day service center was pretty small, and he was standing very close to me. His eyes squinted and his lips curled over his yellowed teeth. I tried to take a step back as he continued. “They make their business about

us, but they should be spending that money on us, not on salaries for people to help us! You – you’re part of it! Everyone here is part of it! Poverty pimps, every last one of you! Just because I don’t have a place to live doesn’t make me hopeless! I am capable! We are perfectly capable of making our own living! Use that money to let us build places where we can grow food and learn trades! You give me a bag of groceries or a sleeping bag, what good does that do me?!? You say you’re helping, but you’re just helping to keep me down. Give me a way to stand up! And we will stand up! You bet we will!”

By this point, he was getting rather loud, and I was getting uncomfortable. I was getting uncomfortable because I knew that some part of what he was saying was true. I could feel the truth under his words. He was speaking from the depth of his pain. And in his face I could see the grief of a nation and a world that works so hard to keep us divided. And the impossibility of that situation, where there are two sides – the ones who are right and the ones who are wrong, the ones who lift people up and the ones who keep people down, the sinners and the righteous, the rich and the poor, and I like to think that I lift people up and I like to think that I’m righteous, but I’m on the wrong side of this equation because I’m a part of this system that seduces me into being a sinner, and that is so much larger than I am and over which I have so little control, and so does me doing these little things really add up to something significant? Because there are two sides, aren’t there? I really want to be on the right one. But here’s someone saying that I’m not. And I can feel the Truth beneath his truth. And I’m confused, because there, in that moment, I am not really sure what side I’m on. Because I agree with him, and want to argue with him at the same time. And this makes me so very uncomfortable. And sometimes, when I get uncomfortable, and I can’t quite figure out what to do in the moment, I shut down.

So I said, “I hear you, brother.” And I took out my phone. And I looked at my latest text messages. And he glared at me. “See,” he hissed through his teeth, “you’re just like all the rest of these hypocrites. You don’t care enough to even listen to what I have to say. I have a plan, and you don’t want to hear it! There is a way to fix homelessness forever, and I know what it is.” He opened the door and stepped halfway through it, turned back and shouted at me, “It’s love! More love is what it is!!” He slammed the door behind him, and the place was quiet for a moment. Then someone said, “Well, he didn’t *sound* very loving...”

The door swung open again just then, and Daryl walked through the door right up to my nose and said very calmly and clearly, “I think that was very rude of you. You’re supposed to be a man of God. Dismissing me to check your phone. That was very rude.” Then he turned on his heels and walked back out the door. I was stunned. I thought about what had happened for the rest of the day. I thought about it as I walked around town, as I answered emails, as I ate my lunch. It’s pretty amazing what happens inside me when someone tells me I’ve done

something wrong. There's a little switch that gets flipped, and even when I know deep down that they're right, there is something inside of me that wants to push back against the accusation. I knew I was wrong. I knew I had really missed an opportunity, that I had acted inappropriately, that I was, in fact, rude to Daryl. But still, there was a part of me that wanted to justify my behavior. "Well, he started it by invading my space, by yelling at me, by accusing me of being something I'm not. He deserved my rudeness. He deserved it, didn't he?"

So, this little battle raged inside of me for the better part of the day. And since I didn't know if I would even see Daryl again, I resolved that I at least needed to get right with myself. I had to wrestle inside of the tension between what I did and what I wished I had done, and somehow find some peace and grace.

It was a Tuesday, so I headed up to the Presbyterian Church across from the library for our weekly Wellness Gathering and Dinner. The cooks were bustling in the kitchen, and I set about to helping Bob set up chairs and tables. People were starting to arrive. We went outside to begin our opening circle, and as I was lighting the sage that we pass around to welcome each other, who should step into the circle but Daryl. My heart started to beat a little faster as the tension and shame of our earlier interaction rose up inside of me. I wondered why he decided to show up here. Did he know I was the one who leads this group?

Daryl looked at me. And he smiled. Not one of those "I'm gonna get you" smiles. But a warm, genuine smile. He held the sage bundle in his hands and he closed his eyes as the smoke washed over him. His eyes opened and he looked right at me, "Thank you for this circle of welcome," he said. As we were walking back inside, I turned to him and stumbled into an apology, "Daryl, listen, I'm sorry about earlier. You were right. I was rude. I could have listened to you, I should have. You seemed upset, and I didn't help that. I'm sorry." "Well, thank you," Daryl responded. "That's a sincere apology. Something I haven't heard in a long time. People don't seem to like to apologize anymore. Especially to someone like me. Someone on the bottom of things." He held out his hand. I took it in mine.

During the prayer time in the Wellness Circle, Daryl invited us into one of the sweetest meditations I've ever experienced. He welcomed us to envision the Light of Love swirling down into the center of the circle, beaming itself into each of our hearts, enlarging our capacity to love and learn from each other, that light connecting us one to another, connecting us to the Source of All Things. He invited us to hold that light within us and to let it lead us into the world. When it was my turn to speak, there was nothing else I could say but "Thank You." And after that prayer, we sat together, ate together, talked, and even laughed together, and we all walked away filled.

What Jesus does in this morning's scripture is he moves the margin right into the middle. He disrupts things as they are and offers an entirely different way of being. The people on the margins are there for a reason. Their actions have labeled them as sinners, and the label makes them impure. If others are to remain pure and righteous, there can be no contact with impure sinners.

It's not so different these days, is it? Except it's much more ambiguous. If we make a place welcoming to people who are different, then they might actually show up. Then we have to contend with the tension that arises – where their truth is not the same as our understanding of reality. We have to contend with why we call them “different.” We have to stand face to face with the possibility that we may actually be a part of the problem that caused their situation in the first place. And Jesus lives this out for his critics. His critics are so deeply entrenched in the system they uphold, they can't even see another way. They are so much a part of the system that keeps sinners separate from them as the righteous, that they can't even imagine being in the same circle with them, let alone listening to them or eating with them. And the parables that Jesus tells illustrate this so well.

He's being hyperbolic here. It is preposterous for a shepherd to leave his flock to find one lost sheep, let alone to throw a party when he finds it...if he finds it. And who gets so excited about a lost coin that she throws a block party when she finds it? Nobody I know. And this is what I think Jesus is saying. He's saying, “it's about the celebration that we can have when we welcome the sinners and tax collectors into the center of the circle.” He's speaking truth into a tense situation. The one who has been separated is the one who deserves the attention.

Look at the context. Jesus is speaking, and the tax collectors and sinners come to him. He doesn't go out looking for them, but they come to him. Why? Well, probably because he doesn't call them sinners, for one, and because he listens to them, and eats with them, and doesn't send them away or put them in their place. He sits in the center of the circle with them. And in the center of the circle there are no sides to take, only the side of love. Jesus shifts the focus and invites his critics to imagine what it would be like if we celebrated them instead of keeping them outside. These people who are displaced, out of no real fault of their own; it's just part of the way things are. Sheep will sometimes wander off; a coin will go missing from time to time. These people who have been labeled and swept to the edges of society because of how their actions are judged by the people who are in charge (and there have always been people who are in charge). These people who are unthinkableably unsociable, unworthy and unknown by anything other than the labels imposed upon them. These people are the ones worth listening to, welcoming, eating with.

The act of eating with people is so human. It is sacred in the truest sense of the word. It is time set apart. And when we are able to eat with others – maybe even just one or two folks – it is so different from when we eat alone. And when we gather with so many more to share food together, it becomes more than just a meal – it is a celebration.

Jesus is asking for more love. More than being happy with the way things are. The loss of one sheep or one coin will not do. He is challenging his critics to reflect more deeply on what is actually happening. He is telling them that these sinners are worth something – to him, to God, to the larger community – and they are at the very center of the celebration that is the beloved kin-dom.

I'll bet Jesus made lots of people very uncomfortable. And maybe Jesus's critics felt something like what I felt when I was faced by Daryl. Maybe they walked around with that experience all day. And maybe they opened themselves to the mysterious workings of God, and felt something shift inside of themselves. And maybe that word "sinner" took on a bit of a different meaning for them. And maybe the next time they saw Jesus, they went to him and apologized and took his hand in theirs and sat at table with him and ate and drank and celebrated.

I saw the email that went out last week from the Governing Board and Social Action, expressing concerns that we may not have enough volunteers to host REST again this season. And I want to offer a little, unsolicited nudge to each of you. Please give this careful and prayerful consideration. This is an opportunity for us, together, to invite people from the margins into the middle of our community, even if for just one night a week. It is an opportunity to have a real, human experience with people who are different, to strip away the labels and see each other as we really are. Because that's what keeps me doing this work, and that's what keeps my hope alive – humanity touching humanity, witnessing the awesome, unpredictable beauty that happens when we invite each other closer and share more love, no matter what anybody else says.

Amen.