

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, October 9, 2016

**Table Fellowship**  
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys  
October 9, 2016

Luke 15:1-10

Our scripture reading this morning is about salvation although it may not seem that way at first. Finding a lost sheep or a lost coin, how does that equate to salvation?

Sinners are lost and need to be found and the search for the lost sheep or the lost coin are emblematic of that.

But who is a sinner? What is a sin? I think that we all know the answers to those two questions --- we are all sinners and sin is anything we do that may be contrary to the will of God.

In the reading from Luke, and in many other places in the New Testament the Pharisees and scribes complain that Jesus is having table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners and thus he needs to be opposed.

Why did they complain about tax collectors separately from sinners? Weren't they sinners too? They were of course, but the Pharisees and scribes didn't see it that way. The tax collectors were agents of Rome and were considered to be just about the lowest form of life at the time because they were all considered to be corrupt. They had assigned quotas of tax money to collect and anything extra they would put into their own pockets. They were despised by everyone. Any person who associated with them was tarred with the same brush. It is no wonder that Jesus was criticized for his table fellowship with them.

But what about the other sinners? If the scribes and Pharisees did not consider themselves to be sinners, how did they decide exactly who a sinner was?

The answer is the 613 commandments in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. The Pharisees and scribes rigorously observed the Torah and its commandments. If anyone did not do so, they were by definition sinners. The Pharisees referred to them as the "People of the Land."

William Barclay <sup>(1)</sup> said, "... *there was a complete barrier between the Pharisees*

*and the People of the Land [the sinners]. To marry a daughter of one of them was like exposing her bound and helpless to a lion. The Pharisaic regulations laid it down, 'when a man is one of the People of the Land, entrust no money to him, take no testimony from him, trust him with no secret, do not appoint him guardian of an orphan, do not make him the custodian of charitable funds, do not accompany him on a journey.' A Pharisee was forbidden to be a guest of any such man or to have him as a guest. He was even forbidden ... to have any business dealings with him."*

Of course, the Pharisees and scribes were not sin free, but in their minds they were. They strictly followed the letter of the Law of the Torah and bragged about it. They were exceptionally proud of their piety and of how they lived. Anyone who did not do as they did was a sinner in their eyes. We would call their attitude sinful, but they didn't of course.

Jesus said, "*... there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.*"

Barclay <sup>(1)</sup> said, referring to the Pharisees, that they would have said, "*There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God.*"

The Pharisees and scribes were unforgiving and condemned Jesus for the fact that he was forgiving --- he forgave everyone who repented and in the ultimate sign of forgiveness gave his own life for the forgiveness of sin.

Have you ever embarrassed someone? If so, according to the Torah you are a sinner, a Person of the Land.

Are you superstitious? Do you eat bacon? Do you have a tattoo? Do you cut your hair? Do you eat raisins?

Doing any of these everyday things, and many, many more would have branded you as a sinner in the eyes of the scribes and Pharisees, but not in the eyes of Jesus.

The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, and the searches to find them, are illustrations of God's desire to find everyone who is lost, not to condemn them as might have happened with the Pharisees and scribes.

Breaking any of the 613 commandments in the Torah could conceivably have led to your being stoned to death. The Pharisees and scribes simply wrote off anyone who they considered to be a sinner. They didn't deserve forgiveness. They deserved nothing

more than destruction.

For the shepherd with the lost sheep, he didn't write off the sheep which had strayed. It was his responsibility and he would search day and night to find the lost sheep and bring it back to the fold. He wouldn't condemn it for wandering off. He wouldn't give up hope and would rejoice when he found it, just as God rejoices when a sinner repents of his or her sin.

Similarly, the woman who searches for the lost coin on the straw-covered dirt floor of her home until she finds it is overjoyed just as God is overjoyed when a person who was lost to sin repents and comes to God.

Jesus doesn't have 613 commandments, many of which are trivial and meaningless. He only has two --- to love God and to love your neighbor.

When we seek to love God we receive his love in return. When we show love for our neighbor, God shows his love for us.

*"Finding and restoring the lost gives pleasure to God as well as to all who are about God's business."* <sup>(2)</sup>

The two parables *"... are not primarily calls to repentance. Sheep and coins can't repent ... These stories function as a disturbing response to the complaints of the Pharisees and scribes ... In answer to the complaint that Jesus has overstepped the boundaries in having table fellowship with sinners, the parables implicitly beckon the Pharisees and scribes to join him, to be a part of the searching, because God is a searching God."* <sup>(3)</sup>

We are also beckoned to table fellowship with our Lord. We too are sinners who God is searching for.

**Amen.**

(1) William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke, rev. ed., Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975.

(2) Fred B. Craddock, Interpretation: Luke, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1990.

(3) Charles B. Cousar, et al, Texts for Preaching – Year C, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1994.