

Luke 15:1-10 (non-lectionary text)

The Second Sunday After Pentecost

June 14, 2020

Today's scripture reading features the scribes and Pharisees.

It's not easy to become a scribe in the first century. To be a scribe means, at a minimum, to be literate, and that's a heavy investment in time and energy in a society where 90-95% are not literate and see no need to be so. Then you need to become an expert in both the content and interpretation of Jewish law as found in the Torah, and then you need to learn the special and specific skills that will land you a position in an aristocrat's household, or the political and religious hierarchy. Scribes have authority over their fellow Jews, have private access to the written laws and the levers of power, and undergo extensive training unavailable to their fellow Jews. They are a class apart.

As for the Pharisees, they move among the common people. But like the scribes, their daily concerns are the law of Moses and its interpretation. As a Pharisee, you know the traditions of your people. You are an authority among them, a resource, an arbiter of community conflicts and of what is proper. As a Pharisee you are an influential player in the push and pull of the religious, social, and political power of the nation. This requires you to distinguish yourself in your personal righteousness, which includes avoiding association with those too poor, sick, perverse or careless to do likewise.

In short, to be either a scribe or a Pharisee means that you have power and status unavailable to the common person, and that you have gained that power and status through a combination of sacrifice, hard work, and privileged access to opportunities.

You aren't like the lower classes, those your society defines as sinners, and to some extent your continued power and status depends on reminding people of that.

So, how do you react to Jesus?

As a Jew who takes their faith seriously, you have been hoping for a Messiah: for a chosen agent of God to save your people as promised in Ezekiel and Isaiah; a shepherd who will gather God's scattered sheep, and bring God's scattered people home from the corners of the civilized world.

So how do you react to this preacher, who people breathlessly hail as a prophet, mighty in word and deed, and perhaps even the Messiah himself? How do you react to this Messiah who shows no interest in the good people, who has no time for you and your prayers and your studies, but instead hangs out and parties with the dregs of society – the sinners – those who, as a good Jew, you are *forbidden* to associate with?

Do you feel a little bit insulted? Do you feel a little bit angry and confused? Do you decide "he can't be anything special after all"?

Do you ask, "Hey, Jesus, what about me? Don't all Jews matter to *the Messiah*?"

It's not easy to become a white professional in the twenty-first century. I worked hard to get where I am: I did eight years of post-secondary education, moved away from friends and family to go to school, went to the other end of the continent for an internship, and then did so again for three years of ministry, living in a Newfoundland fishing village that was quite unlike the major city I grew up in. And where I am isn't much, compared to the chosen few that our economic system elevates to extravagant wealth and status by exploiting the rest.

It's not easy to be white in the twenty-first century, but it's a hell of a lot harder to be black.

It isn't easy to be black when your parents are less likely to have money or good health or good education, when your schools may not be up to the same standards as whites, when dozens of different factors conspire to stack the deck against you in subtle ways.

It's not easy to be black when you're the first suspect for any crime, when being in the wrong place at the wrong time can mean your death, when whites don't understand that while the police mean safety for them, they mean death for you.

It's not easy to be white now that this black reality is more visible. It's not easy to be white when I realize I'm racist. I'm not racist in a cross-burning, bedsheet-wearing, calling-people-"nigger" way. But I'm racist because I live in a racist society.

Unlike in the first century, the church doesn't have the clout to designate and segregate some people as "righteous" and others as "sinners." But society does name its winners and losers, and politicians and demagogues are happy to designate sinners: those who place an undue burden on society. Sinners are visible minorities and undocumented immigrants – but somehow not the people who refuse to have group homes in their neighbourhoods or who conduct business in predatory ways.

Often those divisions operate on racial lines. Often those divisions give me as a white man dozens of subtle, unasked for and often unnoticed advantages. Our society's racism has unspoken rules and assumptions that I ingested as a child just as the black children of Flint, Michigan or the indigenous children of Canada's North ingest tainted water. My racism is as inevitable as it is unintentional.

And having that pointed out hurts.

And in this racist system which is married to our capitalist system of competition and exploitation, I may correctly fear that restoring status and opportunity to others may mean less for me.

And so, when black lives rise up and demand an end to white knees crushing black necks, when black lives cry that Black Lives Matter, my instinctive response is, "But All Lives Matter!" The illusion of social fairness is critical to the idea that I got where I am completely on my own. So when someone points out that the system isn't fair, that black

lives are specifically and uniquely endangered right now, I feel threatened and try to pull the viewpoint back to a distant and universal perspective that's too far away to see the details.

The first rule of Fight Club is that you don't talk about Fight Club.

The first rule of racism is that you don't talk about racism.

A racist and exploitative society works great for those at the top and okay for those in the middle. But if you start talking about it, you throw a wrench in the gears and somebody gets hurt. Probably you.

That's exactly what Jesus is doing when he sits down with the tax collectors and others designated as sinners. Like someone defying segregation laws, he's drawing attention the system and saying, "what are you going to do about it?"

Jesus even makes preachers uncomfortable. I read one sermon about Jesus eating with sinners. The preacher assured his audience it was okay, though, because they were *repentant* sinners!

No they weren't. Jesus eats with them, hangs out with them, drinks with them. He never scolds them. And they don't repent of being poor, or of pursuing the dirty, dangerous, ritually unclean jobs which are open to the poor.

When the good people demand to know why he's messing up the system by doing so, he tells them the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. When sheep get

separated from the flock, they sit down and bleat. They don't come back to the fold by themselves. When coins are lost, they don't roll themselves back into your purse like the One Ring finding its way back to Mordor.

The shepherd doesn't throw a party when the lost sheep comes...sheepishly...back to the flock. No, he goes out and looks for it *while it is still lost*. The woman looks for the coin *because it is lost*.

I think that's the point of the parable. We don't earn God's care and attention, and God has no time for the divisions we draw between each other. In fact, God has a special, extravagant care for those we name sinners. And that offends us good people, because it tears down the narrative that says we got where we are because we deserve it, because *we alone* worked hard, or because God cares about us alone.

It's scary. It's offensive. It's incriminating.

But there is good news in this parable for us white folks.

The one sheep is in danger, but the 99 still belong to the shepherd. The one coin is lost, but the 9 still belong to the woman.

All lives matter, because all lives matter to God, and that cuts both ways.

If all lives matter, then when some of those lives are endangered, we need to focus on those lives in particular. But that doesn't mean the other lives cease to matter. So if "Black Lives Matter" makes you feel like *you don't* matter, or if the awareness of your

complicity in a racist system makes you suddenly aware that you may be the one who is lost, don't be afraid.

Because all lives matter. Your life matters. And so God is searching for you with the intensity of a shepherd who has lost a sheep. God is searching for you with the intensity of a woman who has lost a coin.

It may be that the finding is not pleasant. It may be that when the shepherd pulls you out of that thorn bush, you get a little cut up. It may be that Jesus is offering salvation to the scribes, to the Pharisees, to us with a painful lesson and shocking behaviour, demonstrating that we are not as central as we thought we were.

But never doubt, also, that when God finds us, she will throw a great big party, and there will be rejoicing among the angels of heaven at our repentance and salvation.

Amen.

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...and many friends and colleagues via Facebook.