



PARABLES AND PARTIES
Luke 15:1-10

Today we come to the 15th chapter of St. Luke's gospel. Here we find some of the greatest insights into the essence and character of God – that separates our Christian faith from the other religions of the world. C. S. Lewis was once asked "What is so special about Christianity that distinguishes it from the other great claims of religious faith?" He thought for a second and said, "**The grace of God – the grace of God.**" These stories or parables today – of which we will only study two – revealed exactly that: the grace of God – and the God of grace. One Bible scholar calls this chapter "The gospel within the gospel."¹

Today, Pastor Ray and I begin a summer sermon series based on the parables. Our children's Sunday School will also be studying weekly the same lesson we preach on in their Parable Quest Adventure.

Eugene Peterson is correct when he shares that four parables or mini-stories compose the 15th chapter – not three.² Jesus tells four stories of lostness to help us identify the 'sin' of self-righteousness. The best defense against self-righteousness is a deep awareness of our lost condition.³ The first three stories are built on the same structure – lost – search – found – celebration. Thus, our sermon title is **PARABLES AND PARTIES**. Only the last story is incomplete and lacks a celebration.⁴

It has always amazed me that pastors and church folks tend to focus on the lostness of the 'Prodigal Son' – instead of the lostness of the good son.

It is the son who stayed at home whose sin is the most difficult to deal with.⁵ However, I will let Pastor Ray unpack all that when he preaches on August 15th on that portion of the parable.

In December, 2003 – my wife Mary underwent major surgery at Lancaster General. The doctors are always concerned that in treating you for one treating sickness – your body may be exposed to another illness – mainly infection – which actually can be acquired by going to the hospital.

Likewise – there is one sickness or sin that seems to flourish inside the church house – rather than outside it. The common name for that sickness is self-righteousness. In order for it to take root it requires the soil of a community in which righteousness is honored and even pursued.⁶ This sickness or disease is so damaging

because it goes unnoticed most of the time. It is almost never recognized by a glance in the mirror.⁷ The best defense or protection against this spiritual cancer is an honest confession that we also need a Savior. We are forgiven sinners – but we are sinners. This is why St. Augustine reminds us that “**Confession is good for the soul.**”

As we open our lesson today – the Pharisees were upset that Jesus was eating with sinners and tax collectors. They were grumbling or murmuring. It must have brought back memories of those who murmured against the leadership of Moses. Why is it that good people – church people – murmur and bad people don't?⁸

So in response, our Lord tells a series of stories to correct a distorted picture of God that the religious carried with them – everywhere they went – from the Temple to the town square – to the dinner table. It causes us to reflect today what is the image of God that we present from The Office to the grocery stores to the coffee shop?

What is the attitude that envelopes us and others? Is it one of conversation or a disparaging glance?⁹

I know these stories from sacred scripture are tough for a people who have been taught “Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” – or “God helps those who help themselves.”

However we must remember that in our lesson both the sheep and the coin were lost. They were not disoriented or misplaced – they were lost. The picture is one of rescue and redemption. As Pogo said, “**We have met the enemy and it is us.**” It is as though Jesus is teaching us ‘Don't miss the obvious.’

The Apostle Paul knew this well. He knew of his need of a Savior. Paul – writing to his spiritual son in the faith Timothy – shares: “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst,” **1 Timothy 1:15 (NIV)**. Here God seeks out and saves the very man who sought to destroy the church. It is our lesson today the Lord is teaching us – the church – not to destroy itself – not to forget the ministry and mission shared with us.

It really does not matter much how a person or a thing becomes lost – we just need to know – **we are lost**. The entire Bible is a story of the prevenient grace of God at work in the world. The search began in the book of Genesis.

We know from the biblical story of Adam and Eve and the entrance of sin into the human race – that humanity had and still has a broken relationship with our Creator. There was a need for a bridge to be built – for someone to stand in the gap to allow reconciliation and restoration to take place between a Holy God and a fallen race.

In **chapter 15** God takes the initiative – provides the way back for us. God even rejoices when we do come back. Spiritually speaking we are all lost – homeless. The book of Romans reminds us that “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

All means all. This is why I find it almost comical that the religious establishment is complaining about the people that Jesus spends time with. He spends time and effort with them as well. They were not left out. Imagine a God who actually searches for people like us. A great God who pays a debt we cannot pay – to receive a gift we could not earn. Then God rejoices – even throws a party/banquet – when we do come home.

In this story Jesus never glamorizes sin – but instead focuses on the power and joy of being restored and forgiven. Sin always takes us to a place we do not want to go – and compels us to pay a price that we are unable to pay. Thus we sell our birthright and identity – and become far less than what we were created to be. We become weary of wandering and long to be at peace with God. There is nothing glamorous about sin. So we as a faith community exist for those who are lost. Our mission and ministry is not to say ‘You made your bed – now lie in it.’ Any fool can curse the darkness. Our hope lies in the good news – that God is far more interested in our future than our past. As far as the East is from the West – that is how far the grace of God can reach to restore us. What was lost in Eden can now be found at Calvary.

Dr. Richard J. Mouw was president of Fuller Seminary for many years and an author of a few books. He loved visiting large bookstores and always made his way to the religion section. The shelves carried the usual signs: Eastern Religions, Judaism, the Occult, New Age, and Christianity. However, there was a shelf that was filled with tall books that were labeled “**Oversize Religion.**” He liked that.

He said it reminded us of our tendency to keep religion and God in its place. Then he reflected that the God of the Bible cannot be confined to limited spaces. We need an oversize God – because we humans have an oversize problem – our sinfulness. In our lesson Israel needed a bigger understanding of God. So do we

Let me share a personal story that Mary and I smile at now – but when it happened – smiling was the furthest thing from our minds. We went to the Great Adventure Amusement Park in New Jersey with two other families of our church. We stopped for a moment to use the bathroom. We soon gathered and began our journey to another part of the park. After 15 minutes had gone by – we realized our daughter Jennifer was missing. My heart sunk – panic set in. We had left her at the bathroom. We went without her. We ran as quickly as possible back to the spot - everyone looking in every direction. We then went to the security station – to begin the ‘Lost Kid’ drill. About 90 minutes later – they brought her to us. She had the good sense to report to a security guard. The joy – the relief – we felt was indescribable. Tears everywhere. That is only a foretaste of the joy God feels when we come home to him. We experience this joy when we admit we are lost and need a savior.

This brings us nicely to the Lord’s Table today. Here – Jesus once again welcomes us as sinners and feeds us the Bread of life – and nurtures us with the Cup of salvation. It is his gift to us. Christ continues his life-changing presence in our lives until he comes again. Here we are equipped and nurtured in our calling to invite others to the Gospel Feast. Here we are rescued and redeemed from all the false promises of

our world – and invited to the only kingdom that is eternal. Here we declare our need of a Savior. Come, Lord Jesus, Come! And he does!

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
June 6, 2010 – preached at both services

ENDNOTES

¹ William Barclay, **THE GOSPEL OF LUKE: The Daily Study Bible Series**, revised edition, the Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975, page 199.

² Eugene H. Peterson, **TELL IT SLANT**, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2008, page 94.

³ Eugene H. Peterson and Peter Santucci, **TELL IT SLANT study guide**, William Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 2008, page 24.

⁴ Ibid, Peterson and Santucci, Page 26.

⁵ Ibid, Peterson and Santucci, page 26.

⁶ Peterson, **TELL IT SLANT**, page 88.

⁷ Peterson, page 88.

⁸ Peterson and Santucci, page 24.

⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with Its Translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1615.