

The Barn Party, September 11, 2022, St. Timothy Burnaby

Jeremiah 4.11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1.12-17; Luke 15.1-10

“The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the foremost.”

Prayer

If you are familiar with the previous version of the prayer book, the Book of Common Prayer, or BCP as it's often called, you are probably familiar with the phrase I opened with: “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the foremost.”

The only difference is that in that BCP service, we usually leave out the last part: “*of whom I am the foremost.*” Yes, it is true (and comfortable words) that Jesus came into the world to save sinners. You *can* put a period at the end of that statement. But that other bit is important too.

In recounting Paul's story, the author of First Timothy reminds the audience of Paul's past discriminating against the church. In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul, though he was called *Saul* at that point in the book, held the coats of those who stoned the martyr Stephen to death. He approved of their killing him and went out to arrest many members of the early Christian church and bring them back to Jerusalem to imprison them.

In spite of *all that*, Paul is the most significant figure in the growth of the early church, next to Jesus himself. So, God found a way to make use of Paul, despite his terrible past. God used Paul to spread the love of Jesus to many. The first letter to Timothy opens with this reminder as a way of emphasizing the incredible *grace* of God—that even the most misguided and harmful people—the “foremost” of sinners—can be welcomed into the fold.

Our readings today all have to do with “salvation”—how one is “saved”. But who is it that does the saving?

When we consider the two parables that Jesus tells the grumbling Pharisees in our Gospel reading, it is the shepherd who goes off to find (or “save”) the lost sheep and the woman who finds (“saves”) the lost coin. We're used to thinking of Jesus (or God) as “the Good Shepherd” and that would fit with our notion that it is Jesus who saves—but in this parable, Jesus turns the question to the Pharisees. “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? [...] 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?” We're not supposed to see the work of God here. Jesus suggests that his response to the so-called “sinners” that he was criticized for eating and drinking with was the same as any shepherd seeking the lost in their flock. Jesus is seeking after the “lost”. He's not worried about those who aren't “sinners”. They are the ninety-nine who are left behind. They are the sure thing. The faithful ones. The older brother in the tale of the Prodigal Son (which we heard some weeks ago and which follows right after these two stories in Luke's Gospel).

The challenge for us when we hear this familiar parable is, as it often is, “where do we see ourselves in this parable”. And I know you've heard this sermon before. Probably multiple times. And yes, there are good reasons, sometimes, for us to consider ourselves as the lost sheep that Jesus goes looking for. Or even the lost coin (because a coin doesn't go wandering off—if the coin is lost, it's not the fault of the

coin). In both cases, we can be comforted that our God will expend all kinds of energy looking for us, eager to bring us back into the fold. That's what happened with Paul after all, right?

So, was it Jesus who saved Paul? In Paul's story, was Jesus the shepherd who left the ninety-nine sheep to go after that one wayward sinner and bring him back into the fold? Because we can also look at that parable as though it is supposed to be us who go out to save "the lost". That has also been a popular interpretation of this parable. Jesus expects that the Pharisees would agree with him that they would leave the ninety-nine in the field to go after the one lost sheep. Or, like the woman with the missing coin, that they would drop everything and work tirelessly until that one lost coin was found. Many Christians have dedicated their lives toward being like that shepherd and seeking the wayward sheep. Or like that woman and tirelessly seeking "the lost".

But there is something else in that parable that we often overlook. We often miss the grumbling of the Pharisees that started the whole thing. They are unimpressed with Jesus, cavorting with these people of questionable morals and unsavoury lifestyles. This is not how a true prophet would behave. The "correct" Christian behaviour (that many of us have learned over the years) is that these kind of people are to be shunned. Right? Isn't that how we're supposed to treat people? (Is that how Jesus treated them?)

But that's not the thing we overlook.

What we often miss when we consider these parables is the joy.

Jesus says, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." And similarly, after the parable of the coin, he says, "Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Now, I don't know how you answered my question earlier, about who you were in these parables. But *maybe* you decided that you were one of the ninety-nine left behind. You were one of those coins that never got displaced. (Or, if you're reading ahead, you are the *older* brother in the story of the Prodigal Son.) If that's where you are, and I think that's a reasonable place to consider ourselves in these parables, then we are not "lost". We have not lost our way and we aren't waiting to be rescued. Not by Jesus, and certainly not by someone else who has taken it upon themselves to "save" us because *they* have determined that we, most certainly, are "lost" and need "saving".

But, if we are in the ninety-nine, that also means that we are not out there, searching the fields and sweeping up our houses looking for the lost, the missing. Maybe we're not even sure what it would *mean* to be "lost". Maybe we don't know how we could tell, for sure, that someone is not *already* "saved" and so we're not trying to be their saviour.

And maybe we're already pretty sure that we *have* been saved. Maybe not in a dramatic fashion, like Paul. Perhaps there's no sordid history of our previous lives of debauchery. But even without that, we feel pretty confident that it was indeed Jesus who brought us into the fold. I mean, if Jesus is out there looking for lost sheep, you've got to expect that he brings one back every once in a while, right? That he's not just searching for that same lost sheep all this time? In that case, maybe it's not just ninety-nine in the fold anymore. Maybe that number has already grown.

But, most importantly, that also means that the *joy* that Jesus talked about, the joy for the one that repents—that joy is ongoing. That celebration in heaven for the one that repents, just like the celebration that the shepherd has when he finds his sheep, or the party that the woman throws when she finds her coin—that party is still raging. It hasn't stopped. And guess what? We're already at the party! Some of us have been there for quite a while already. We're celebrating. We're kind of like one big family where, even though not everybody gets along all the time, we can share joy with one another in good times and bad. We can weather the storm, together. There are hardships. And things are not always easy. Our world is still one where terrible things happen, like they did last weekend in Saskatchewan. We still struggle with how to make sense of our world. How do we mourn a head of state while still acknowledging her role in problematic structures that have caused harm to so many people? How do we hold those things in tension? How do we break bread with those we disagree with?

How? We follow the example of Paul. "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the foremost." We start by acknowledging that we have all been saved—we have been brought into the fold. As we are. Imperfect, flawed, sometimes ornery and difficult and grumpy (or maybe that's just me). But we have been brought into the sheepfold of Christ. And we have been welcomed into this never-ending party. We have a taste of that party each Sunday—and I think you can feel it here at St Tim's. We get to experience that *joy* that Jesus talked about as we welcome newcomers into the fold and recognize the grace by which we ourselves have been brought in. May we bask in that joy—and may that joy continue to be evident to all who find themselves in our sheepfold. Amen.