

Proper 19, Year “C” [RCL, Track 2]: Exodus 32:1, 7-14; Psalm 51:1-11; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Title: Who's the New Rector Eating With?

There have been a lot of movies about travelling into the future. You might remember H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*. Or you might think of the movie, *Back to the Future*. As I read this story from our Gospel this morning, I began to imagine that maybe I could see into the future. And what did I see?

I saw that some time had passed. I had ended my tenure as Interim Rector here at St. Timothy's and you had called your permanent Rector. And the new Rector had found a house and she and her family, of course, have moved to Calhoun. Problem was that though she's been rector for over a month, not many parishioners had seen her outside of church.

However, there was a rumor going around that the new rector was throwing some kind of a party at her new house. But as time went by, no one in the parish could seem to find anybody who had gotten an invitation. Yet, the rumors of the upcoming party persisted. One of the parish wardens had even called the Bishop to ask if he had gotten an invitation to the party. No, no he said, he didn't know anything about a party at the rector's home. Was there some sort of a problem? No, no said the warden, he was just curious. Just forget that I called.

Well, came the night of the rumored party and the Senior Warden and her spouse, and another member of the vestry and his wife – these two couples were coming back from dinner out and decided that maybe the route home, though nine miles out of the way, actually went by the rectors house.

Well, as they approached the house, what a sight there was to see. Out on the back deck there was indeed a party going on. And what a party it was. There was laughter, and copious amounts of food on the grill, and the wine – the wine seemed to be flowing in abundance. But the most distressing thing was the fact that not a single member of St. Timothy's seemed to have been invited. Rather, it seemed that the people whom the rector had invited to her party were the worst collection of local thieves, and scoundrels, and shady characters you have ever seen. I mean, it was like a convention of who not to be seen with in Gordon County.

Well, as you might expect telephone lines were busy and the people of St. Timothy's were, quite frankly, not particularly amused. So much so that the vestry

arranged for a specially called meeting with the new rector. Their message to the Rector was pretty much, “You seem to be pretty friendly with sinners. And you seem to forget that it is we who called you here to be pastor to us. We’re not paying you to frolic with the rift-raft you know.”

Well, enough of this modern, revised version of Luke’s gospel. The point is, of course, that this is exactly how the Pharisees and the Scribes were feeling about Jesus when they saw him in friendly conversation and eating with, and no doubt sharing a glass of wine or two wine with ‘Tax Collectors and sinners.’ Why was this Jesus, a self-proclaimed teacher of Israel (and thus by extension, their pastor) – why was Jesus socializing with and spending time with these unsavory sorts. All of this was quite unexpected and quite unsettling.

Could it be that there is a little Pharisee in us all?

Let us take a little closer look at this text. This day in the life of Jesus takes place in Palestine during a time when the Romans were very much viewed by the Jews as occupiers. At best, there was a relationship of what we might call ‘restrained tolerance’ between the local Jewish citizenry and their Roman rulers. Some Jews, called Zealots, even proposed violent opposition to the Romans. It was not all that uncommon for a so – called zealot to take a small concealed knife into a crowded street or market place, plunge it into a Roman soldier, and then slip back into the crowd as if he too were astonished at what had happened. Such a tactic was, in fact, a form of first century terrorism.

During this time, the Romans had developed a system whereby locals had been recruited to serve as tax collectors for and in the name of the Empire. Problem was, the tax collectors not only collected the taxes imposed by Rome, but were allowed to add on additional taxes as a kind of bonus system. In reality they could assess whatever amount of tax they felt the taxpayer could be induced or coerced to pay. And so it is easy to see why these tax collectors were hated and despised by the local citizens. They not only were seen as traitors, but as thieves and extortionist as well.

So, these were the tax collectors spoken of in our reading this morning, but that still begs the question: Who were the ‘sinners’ mentioned in this story? Who was it that Jesus had invited to his parry? Well, they may have been persons whose sins were so notorious that they had been officially chastised and banned from Synagogue worship. In other words, their sins would have been well known and they themselves would have been well known. But whoever they were, they would have been seen, shall we say, as high-profile sinners.

Jesus was consorting with the worse of the worse – notorious sinners and tax collectors. And the church leaders were not amused and they had called his hand on it.

In response, Jesus does not allow himself to get into a debate. Rather, he tells two stories. One about a shepherd who diligently seeks out a lost sheep. The other about a woman who diligently seeks to find a lost coin. And upon finding the lost sheep and the lost coin there is much rejoicing. And Jesus says, that just like this shepherd who found his lost sheep and just like the woman who found her lost coin, there is much rejoicing in heaven over one sinner, one person who has lost his or her way, who is then found and reunited with a loving, forgiving God.

But it occurs to me that all of this might be self-evident. Maybe no one needs a preacher to explain these two parables. But why would the designers of the lectionary include the reading from the Old Testament this morning that reminds of the event concerning the making of a Golden calf? Why juxtapose the parable of the ninety-nine and the one, and the parable of the lost coin with the story wherein the people are impatient with God and who then take to creating a Golden calf to worship?

Although I was not one of the designers of the lectionary where certain texts are prescribed for each Sunday of the year, I would venture an answer to that question. And I would venture to say that when we find an answer to that question, we have found the key to understanding the true import of these Jesus parables about lost sheep and lost coins. That is because the answer to the question ‘why the story of the Golden calf on this day of all days,’ lies in the peoples plea to the leaders that they make gods for them. Do you hear it? It’s not seek out our God. It is not help put us in a place where God might find us. It’s not help us on our journey such that in our seeking we might find God. It is not lead us to God. It is MAKE us a God. Create for us a God. Give us a manufactured God. Give us a god of human design. Give us a God that we can understand and relate to. Give us a god who fits our idea, our notion, of who or what God is. Create for us a God I can be comfortable with. Give us a god that sort of thinks like us. This God of Moses, we don’t even know where he is.

Is this not what we are tempted to do? Oh, for sure, no one in this congregation has made any Golden calves lately, but do we not tend to want to create a God with whom we are comfortable? Do we not tend to create a god who fits neatly into our sense of how the world works? Do we not tend to want to create for ourselves a god whose sense of justice is sort of like our own? Do we not want to align ourselves with a god who certifies our prejudices?

Do we not tend to want to create a God who is a whole lot Old Testament and therefore makes room for us to be as judgmental as we might be were it not for the New Testament Jesus who said, “You who are without sin cast the first stone.” Or the New Testament Jesus who had a special heart for the poor and calls on us to have such a heart as well.

My friends this is the point of these two parables. It is to say along with the ancient prophet Isaiah that God's ways are not your ways.¹ And we do well to not forget it. And we do well, in fact, to thank God and to praise God that it is so.

Most of us I imagine tend to think of the one lost sheep as that poor, lost, wayward soul, but I think Jesus is telling us through this parable that the one lost sheep is really the whole human race. And the ninety-nine sheep who never get lost? -- well, could it be that Jesus is saying -- to the Pharisees, and the scribes; to you, and to me -- that the ninety-nine are not simply props in this parable. What I'm saying is, did you ever meet any of those ninety-nine who are not in need of repentance? Did you ever meet one, much less ninety-nine who is without sin?

No, the one lost sheep stands for us all. We have ALL erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, and we are all in need of repentance and of the forgiveness that only comes from a God who is full of grace, and whose love and desire to forgive is greater than we could ask or imagine.

The shepherd, of course, in this parable is God and he will not be made into our image. He would rather go out of the God-business than to be turned into a god who is the bookkeeper, the scorekeeper, the tallyman of our sins. The One whose delight is in judging rather than the One whose delight is in healing, restoration, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

These stories remind us that it is through the saving grace of the Great God who created and loves us all and who searches us out, that is the means of grace and the hope of glory. It is God who saves us and not we ourselves.

And so as the Psalmist writes and we pray, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving kindness."

Well, truth be known, we'd better all hope that Jesus is willing to hang around and eat with the wrong crowd because we're all -- each and everyone -- the sort who are in need of God's grace. In fact I have it on pretty good authority that there is a meal to be served here in a few minutes, a kind of party, where there will be served food and drink for all who would have it. And it's a party that has been put together by Jesus and he promises to be present. And we all are invited.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

¹ Isaiah 55:8,9