

Sunday, September 14, 2025
Proper 19, Year C
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In our lesson from Luke,
we encounter Jesus at a table with the supposed “wrong” kind of people.

He’s hanging out with sinners and tax collectors.

Meanwhile the supposed “right” kind of people stand at a distance.
The Pharisees and scribes are watching him closely—
judging, scheming, grumbling.

“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!” they complain.

Today, Luke invites us to hear the gospel message by contrasting how Jesus engages with
two very different groups of people.

One group thinks they have it all figured out.
They think they are found.

The other group has nothing figured out.
They know they are lost.

On one hand there are the Pharisees and scribes,
the religious know-it-alls of the day.

They know all the scriptures both backwards and forwards.
They have kept all the commandments.
They have, in their minds, earned a place at the table.

On the other hand, there are the sinners—
tax collectors who betray their own people to make a profit,
and ordinary men and women who are considered failures,
outcasts, nobodies,
lost causes.

And yet, Jesus chooses to eat with them.
He doesn’t scold them. He doesn’t judge them.
He welcomes them as they are.

It is no wonder the Pharisees grumble.
If anyone deserves to dine with Jesus, surely it is them—
not those sinners over there.
It is not fair.

In response to their complaints,
Jesus tells two short parables.

A shepherd loses one sheep,
leaves the ninety-nine to search,
finds it, carries it home,
and throws a party with the neighbors.

A woman loses one coin out of ten,
searches her house until she finds it,
and calls her friends to celebrate.

Both parables end the same way—
with rejoicing.

Jesus goes on to say,
“There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents
than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

Upon first hearing, this sounds strange.
Are there really ninety-nine out of a hundred who need no repentance?
Surely Jesus isn't saying that 99% of the world is righteous.

If he is, that would offend the Pharisees and scribes,
because in their minds they are the only ones who are righteous.

In their minds, they are the cream of the crop, the top 1%.
In their minds, Jesus is bad at math.

But that's the point.
As he often does, Jesus uses hyperbole to make a point.

Jesus isn't a calculating mathematician. Thanks be to God.

Of course, there is no such thing as ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

There is only one who is righteous—Jesus Christ,
who is our paschal lamb, the one without blemish.

The sacrifice for our sin.
The one who lost his life so we might be found.

Jesus' hyperbolic statement exposes the Pharisees' blindness.

They think of themselves as the few in this world who are righteous.
They imagine they have no need of repentance.
But in truth, they too are sinners because sinners are all there are.

They too are lost—
in their self-righteousness,
in their judgment,
in their grumbling.

Speaking of being lost, there are a lot of lost and broken people in our country today.
This past week served as another tragic reminder of this.

Lord, have mercy on us all.

But judging, scheming, grumbling isn't going to fix anything.
Those things just make matters worse.

Only the mercy and healing that comes with God's grace can make things better—
a grace that has the power to soften even the hardest of hearts,
a grace that searches for those whom most of us would assume leave for dead.

This leads us to the heart of the parable.
Who, exactly, is Jesus calling to repent?

Sheep cannot repent. About all sheep can do is go, “Baaaa.”
Coins cannot repent. Coins are inanimate objects.
And inanimate objects do not walk away.

Except socks.
Socks walk away.
But this isn’t the Parable of the Lost Sock.

When Jesus speaks of repentance in today’s lesson,
his words are not intended for the sinners and tax collectors.

These parables are told as a response to the religious leaders’ grumbling –
those whose hearts have been hardened by self-righteousness and judgement.

These religious leaders are being called to repent
of their judgmental hearts,
of their obsession with measuring themselves by the failures of others,
repent of their unwillingness to rejoice
when God’s grace is extended to those whom they count unworthy.

Thomas Merton wrote,
“Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy.”

That is what Jesus is doing here.
He is welcoming and extending hospitality to others with no strings attached.
And that is precisely what the Pharisees and scribes cannot bring themselves to do.

If we are honest,
this is not only the Pharisees' and scribes' problem.
It is a human problem.

We want to believe life should be governed by fairness.

But Mom and Dad were right.
Life isn't fair.

If life were fair, then I'm afraid we'd all get what we deserve.

The gospel isn't fair and that is good news for the lost.

Yes, the gospel isn't fair to those of us who consider ourselves counted among the ninety-nine who are righteous.

But what happens when we are confronted with our own lostness,
our own failure, our own sin, our own betrayals?

Suddenly, we are glad the gospel isn't fair.

And so, the call to repentance is not just for them.
It is for us.

It is a call to return to the One who lost his own life
to find us in our lostness and raise us to life again,
raise us with a love that is willing to risk everything for you,
for me, and yes, even for our enemies.

Even those people who look, think, act, and vote differently than you.

So, maybe change doesn't start out there.
It starts in here—
in our own hearts, by confronting our own lostness.

The wisdom of a Hasidic rabbi captures this truth.

Reflecting on his life from his deathbed, he said:

“When I was young, I set out to change the world.
When I grew a little older, I perceived that this was too ambitious,
so I set out to change my state.
This too, I realized as I grew older, was too ambitious,
so I set out to change my town.
When I realized I could not even do this,
I tried to change my family.
Now as an old man, I know that I should have started by changing myself.
If I had started with myself,
maybe then I would have succeeded in changing my family,
the town,
or even the state—
and who knows, maybe even the world.”

That is where the call to repentance begins:
with ourselves.

Not with changing the entire world.
Not with fixing everyone else.

But with opening our own hearts to God,
allowing God’s grace to soften us where the world has made us hard.

And when we open ourselves to God’s grace in this way,
miracles are bound to happen.

We begin to see others not as “the wrong kind of people,” or as “enemies,”
but as neighbors, as beloved children of God.

So, the question isn't whether anyone is too far gone for God.
God will not rest until all are found.

The question is whether we will join the celebration when God finds the "wrong" kind of people.

Will we stay in the shadows grumbling, or will we come into the light and rejoice?
Will we finally learn that grumbling only serves to harden our hearts?
Making a deeper chasm in an already divided world.

Will we learn? Maybe. Maybe not.
But thanks be to God, the good news does not depend on us.

Because the truth is, the party has already begun.
The shepherd has already gone out and found his sheep.
The woman has already searched and recovered her coin.
The Son has already laid down his life and been raised again.

And because of God's relentless love,
the lost are found,
the dead are raised,
and heaven rejoices in anticipation of the day when all of earth is filled with songs of salvation.

But we don't have to wait for that day.
We can join the heavenly choir now
and start filling the earth today
with that unending song of praise—
a song that promises to turn the world's grumbling into rejoicing.

Amen.