

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship
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A Searching, Shepherding God

I like living in the country. I love to see the fields and woods from nearly every vantage point from the house. It's great to be able to take a walk in any direction. However, before you get too idyllic of a picture in mind...there would be a few things that I would change. Note that I said we are able to see woods and fields from *nearly* every vantage point of the house. One view is interrupted by a hefty dose of farm equipment and cow lots! (farm equipment = dust; cow lots = flies + and aroma!) Also, if only it wouldn't move me *closer* to the cow lot, I'd also move the house back a bit from the road. Traffic passes quite closely to the living room window!

So from our porch we have a front row view of passing vehicles. Besides the neighbors and a few other "regulars" there is still quite a bit of unfamiliar traffic. Sometimes I find myself wondering, "who is that and where did they come from?" When out for a walk, I must admit that sometimes I feel myself shrink back as I see - close-up -the "character" who is passing by in the car...truck...or van! Again, I find myself asking, "who is that...and not only where did they come from...but when did they last shave!!!) How easy it is to feel uncomfortable around persons who don't quite look like I wish they did! (Ask Martin how he frightened a woman once in the days before cell phones when he knocked on her door...on a hot summer day...in sweaty, dirty, farmer clothes...)

The parables that we've heard this evening describe for us folks who also weren't so sure about one another. These stories aren't new to us; so makes them difficult to really pay attention to. I recently read an article about the difference between being "hard of hearing" and "hard of listening!" Stories abound in each of our homes about "selective hearing"...or perhaps it is truly more accurately described as "selective listening!" In any case, just like "familiar" voices seem easy to tune out, so it is with familiar biblical accounts. We've heard them so many times it's easy to only "half-way" listen. However, just as the very last words of Chapter 14 challenged those at that first gathering, so may we be challenged as well... "Let anyone with ears to hear *listen!*"

With awareness of this challenge of familiarity, let's alert ourselves to that which we are invited to hear in these parables. What is that we may not have heard before or need to hear again? Let's revisit the text.

We come upon a large crowd gathered around Jesus. All sorts of people make up this crowd. That's the definition of a crowd;...all kinds of people mixed up in the same space! Where have you been recently where you have been part of a crowd? Picture the occasion in your mind's eye....for me it would have been at Swiss Days. It, too, provides

an interesting crowd made up of all sorts of people! Working at the Swiss Village booth always leads me to that same “watching traffic” wonderment... “who are these people and where do they come from? But back to the crowd gathered around Jesus...

Tax collectors and sinners, followers of Jesus and religious leaders were all part of this crowd. However, the tax collectors and sinners weren't just hanging around the edges of the crowd doing whatever tax collectors and sinners *usually* do. No, instead, they were “coming near” and they were “coming near” in order to really hear Jesus. They were “coming near” in order “to listen.” The “usual” crowd rules were getting tested!

Again, let's think of being in a crowd. Crowds are really a big assembly of many little clusters of people. Even though one may be part of the larger crowd at Swiss Days...there is still a sense of *who speaks to whom!!* No doubt, the “rules” were similar in the crowd gathered around Jesus. But now, the usual “outsiders” were getting too close to the center! As they drew near to listen, the tax collectors and their ilk were encroaching on the comfort zone of the leaders and they weren't happy about it, “...the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling.”

It is precisely because of the “grumbling” that Jesus tells the two stories. It is easy to breeze right past this. It's easy to miss the reason for these parables. When I think of the parable of the lost sheep or the lost coin I usually find myself thinking about “those other people...,” “the lost ones...” Even as I was thinking about this sermon, I've had to remind myself again and again to direct my focus back to the ones who are being addressed and why such a story is being told to them. This is not a story addressed to the tax collectors and the sinners about God's gracious mercy; instead it is an account addressed to the “insiders” who were grumbling! Grumbling about “...the tax collectors and sinners who were coming near to listen to Jesus!”

Both groups were listening alright, but with very different sets of ears! We can almost “see” the two kinds of “listening”...imagine the determined, defensive body language of the Pharisees – jaws set, arms crossed. Yes, they, too, were paying *very close* attention to what Jesus was saying! (don't you wonder what it was?) At the same time, the ones who are described as “the listeners” were the tax collectors and sinners. I envision them with necks stretched as they sought a better vantage point. (Zaccheus and the sycamore tree) It's a “kingdom moment” where suddenly things are upside down! Suddenly, those who were accustomed to the safety of their own circles found themselves standing side by side with “undesirables,” who, captivated by Jesus, with eyes glistening with curiosity and hope, drew near to him. The Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble about this arrangement of things...so Jesus “shepherded” *them* with these parables...

These stories are not so much about “lost ones” as they are directed to the attitude of the religious folks. **We** might emphasize the finding of the “*lost*” but it is the “*already found*” whom the parables are addressing. **So...who might Jesus really be referring to in these parables when he says, “I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of**

God over one sinner who repents.” Who is it in this setting that Jesus is inviting to a spirit and posture of repentance? In this crowd, who has strayed and gone missing?

Let’s “listen” to the questions that these stories evoke for religious insiders; that is, for religious people...like us.

First, why was Jesus’ fellowship with those on the “outside” so offensive? The scripture records that he “*welcomed them and ate with them!*” Jesus didn’t just nod his head to them with a distant smile; Jesus engaged with these “sinners” like real people...not like untouchable objects or projects. They weren’t tokens collected in support of a certain outreach program or initiative. Jesus related to them as person of value, as persons with worth and gifts to share, not as groups with labels... Yet, I can relate to the Pharisees discomfort. Something in my “justice” radar is alerted... somehow I feel slighted if someone “less deserving” receives an “insider’s welcome.” Grumbling...and murmuring...good Christian ways of expressing displeasure! Maybe even an internal response which might alert us to “listen” carefully!

Next, why do we seek to “manage” who gets close to Jesus? What does it say about our view of God & Jesus? Does it mess up our comfort zone if others who are draw near? Is it bad if our faith journey leads us into fellowship with others very different from us? Are we “jealous” if God’s love is shown to someone we don’t think is deserving of it? And if we are jealous, what can this insight teach us about ourselves? Perhaps again, our response might serve to alert us to “listen” carefully!

These are hard questions, good questions, and important questions. As we “listen” to the questions and allow the Spirit of Christ to move among us, may we be alert to any grumbling that any we find within ourselves about “outsiders.” As we “listen” to the ways of Jesus, may our posture change from that of grumbler to one who knows that expansive joy of Jesus’ welcome – and extending invitation to a seat at the Lord’s table.

Linda read for us from 1 Timothy...“But I received mercy...and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus...Jesus Christ displayed the utmost patience” ...with me. Paul gives thanks for the gift of mercy, love and grace...and understands this gift to him – the worst of sinners- as a sign of God’s desire for all people.

God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit to be a community of grace, joy and peace so that God’s healing love can flow through us to the world.

As disciples of Jesus, as his *followers*, may we take his lead, may we follow his example in welcoming and joining with others in “table fellowship.” All around us are persons whom our Christian culture has labeled as outsiders: persons with different life experiences – uncommon for us perhaps because they come from a different community,

persons of differing cultures and places of origin, persons with different experiences in understanding gender, persons who adhere to religious faiths other than ours.

Just as Jesus “searched out” the grumbling Pharisees and scribes, inviting them into a new way of being faithful, Jesus also searches for and shepherds us into practices of faith which bring joy instead of grumbling; expansive welcome instead of anxious safe-keeping.

Note that our parables end with great rejoicing...all the sheep are again together in the flock, all the coins are again safely in hand. Reunion at the Lord’s table is a sign of the Kingdom, an real-life expression of God’s mission in the world.

Welcoming others, not just begrudgingly “scooting over” brings the promise of great delight! As surprising and unlikely as that may seem! God shepherds and searches out not only those who are “lost, but also those who have forgotten that they are “already found.” Instead of the burden of grumbling spirits, Jesus invites religious folks into an experience of welcome and joy – an experience we share together...when we turn toward one another – and side-by-side listen to Jesus. AMEN