

Invited to the Feast

We get to eat whenever we fill the table

A sermon by The Rev. Drew Downs

September 11, 2016
Proper 19C | Luke 15:1-10

Rose and I were newlyweds. We were married almost a year when I lost my ring.

It was at the end of school--literally the last day of my second year, and I was about to drive back over the border from Ontario into Michigan. Needless to say, I was freaking out.

I walked the halls, the classrooms, the sidewalks, retracing every step from the last time I saw my wedding band. Nothing. It was nowhere. I could hardly believe I lost my wedding ring.

Everyone was gone for the day, the school was quiet, and I had a three-hour drive ahead of me. Alone.

I was not looking forward to the call.

Surprised. Sad. It was about what you would think. But Rose was supportive. And we ordered a new one, a size smaller so it would stay.

Unlike the shepherd or the woman in our story, this one doesn't end with my leaving every stone turned over and my finding my ring. It was lost and gone.

But like this story, the heart of the story isn't about the loss itself (it's just a ring/like it's just a coin). It's about relationship and connection. Because that ring wasn't just a ring, but a symbol of our connection to one another.

When Jesus tells this parable, he's telling this great crowd of people who have gathered that there is way more to life, to faith, to GOD (!) than being lost.

It's about connecting.

This crowd that Jesus is talking to is pretty diverse now. Up to this point, it has been

followers: the inner circle, the onlookers and the gawkers, and the hate-watchers (those are the Pharisees and Scribes who follow him because they can't stand him, but just can't look away).

And Jesus is thinning the crowd a little, talking about how hard it is to follow and what is really at stake. He just had a really uncomfortable dinner with the Pharisees in which he talks about a great feast, a wedding feast, and all the guests, these supposed friends, come up with lame excuses to skip it.

Jesus is talking about the kingdom of GOD! And he's saying that GOD is swinging open the doors of the kingdom to the weak because the strong are RSVPing "No"!

So now we're grumbling and upset and confused because who is starting to show up in this great big crowd? Those very people of whom Jesus spoke in the parable! Here it's "tax collectors and sinners". And how do the elites respond?

"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Like it's a bad thing.

Luke then launches into a single parable.

Notice how it doesn't say three parables: this sequence we label as The Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal (Lost) Son. But to the writer of Luke, this is one parable. Three stories, perhaps, but one lesson.

And think about how alike this parable is to what we've been talking about over the last 2 weeks. How we have the lost who are missing from the feast. And we have the lost who isn't a sheep, but a coin, part of the economy, the system.

Like Jesus healing the man with dropsy and curing his insatiable thirst and confronting the Pharisees in their elitist posture, excluding and dividing around the table, making their own feast while the hungry, the sick, and the lame are left out in the cold.

How these two will also line up against the third part of the parable: how the shepherd's concern for the lost sheep matches the father's concern for the son who left him. And then how the woman's concern for her coin is urgent enough to light a lamp and go sweeping and preparing the house in search of a coin, something not even alive (!); how much that will mirror the father looking for his suddenly rebellious eldest son.

This whole thing is one big story. And it is so much more than losing something. And it is so much more than finding it again. It's about connection. And what is the place of connection?

The Table.

It is a feast around a common table. Like we do every Sunday. We come from our different places with our frustrations and confusions and we gather together as one. Where it doesn't matter who's a professor and who's a student, who's an officer and who's an ex-con. Here we're the same. No. We're not the same. But we're loved. We're invited and welcomed. And every place is deserved.

But here's the problem with equality. We have to give it to each other.

And I think that's the trouble the Pharisees were having in hearing Jesus. Because he was asking them to give up purity and privilege. To break the rules and take a stand against their culture's accepted practice. Forgo their financial interest and jeopardize their lives with the Roman Empire. And if you're them, what fool

would follow Jesus? It would be like throwing everything away.

It's easy to condemn them for not letting in the riff raff. Harder to be like the woman and look for them anyway. To be like the father and go after the son who makes a scene at the resurrection party, the Easter celebration, the Eucharistic feast.

But I don't think Jesus is only focused on the losing and finding, the going and the coming, the falling away and the seeking to come home. It's about the connection. The Table and the Feast.

The Feast.

This is the point of all the dead coming to life. Of the son being brought back from the dead so that he and his Mom can be restored to community. When the son who was dead is restored to life, to the family, to the great feast with the big, fatted calf. 16 oz steaks for everybody! Because it's the Feast! Find the sheep, find the coin, then what? Party! Wake the neighbors in the middle of the night, who cares if they're sleeping. Celebrate! Connect! Feast!

With everybody! With your Black Lives Matter friends and your Trump-voting friends and your Transgendered friends and that one friend who seriously won't let it go! They are all supposed to be here, around this table. This isn't for elites and the special and the insiders. This is a table which welcomes everybody.

But here's the thing about the Feast. It doesn't just happen here. This Table is tied to every table; this Feast is tied to every breakfast, lunch, dinner, tea time, coffee break, casual encounter, business meeting, every class and instruction, and any other place where people connect. We bring that with us to this Table and we bring this, what we do from this Table to every other table.

And the hardest part for us here isn't the part where everyone is welcome at this Table. As a community, we get that. Our problem is inviting people to it. Giving out those invitations, as it says in chapter 14 to

"Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame."

and invite in the tax collectors and sinners, too.

For it isn't enough to say everyone is welcome, we need to make sure they know they are invited.

So I'm going to invite all of you to several feasts. The Holypalooza Feast at 10:00. The Barbecue afterward. The Servicepalooza sorting and bagging after the big service.

Come out to the soccer fields this afternoon and eat with Sophia and me as we watch Isaiah's first match of the fall season at 1:00. Come out a week from this Tuesday to office hours at Java Haute. Come to our Bible Study on Thursday night. If you bring food we'll love you even more. But you don't have to. It's a different kind of feast.

Connect with each other! Feast with Jesus! For we make the kingdom where we Feast as the kingdom!