

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

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SINNERS

and eating with them

by Drew Downs

We get the series of lost parables, capped by the one we call the Prodigal Son, after Jesus has been hanging out with tax collectors and sinners, which the Pharisees take issue with and question his bona fides. Because everyone knows that a Hebrew avoids these people — especially a rabbi. So Jesus is clearly mistaken. He needs to be reminded about the right behavior and corrected. But Jesus clearly doesn't think that is necessary.

These parables, which connect with ideas of forgiveness and searching and finding, are also stories which each end in celebration. So doesn't it track then that the eating, the others treat as forbidden, is the necessary response to finding what is lost, in revealing the mercy of God? And even further, is it not right to honor and celebrate here and now wit those who are found, to those who are returned, those who God seeks to love? Isn't that our real job anyway?

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WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

Sin

I don't speak often of sin, but when I do, I dig into it!

I find the public vision of sin feels a lot like Goldilocks – we're either saying too little, too much, or just right. And the same goes for what we talk about when we talk about sin, which is to say, we like to pretend some sin doesn't count and other sins **really** count and the nice middle group of sin is the most comfortable.

The problem with all of this is that many Christians have an unhealthy obsession with sin or hold a too light a vision of sin, so we don't really know what to do with it. Or how to feel about it. Or even when to call something a sin. I think this obsession and our binary and Goldilocks understandings, too, are unhelpful.

In this week's gospel, we see Jesus daring to eat with notorious sinners – and the Pharisees have a problem with that. At its root is not the nature of sin, but of judgment, mercy, and the capacity for God's people to offer grace. Jesus expresses a desire to seek out the lost, the ones separated from the grace of God, and restoring them to community. The Pharisees, on the other hand, are sitting inside the community and seeking to keep the lost out of it. This is telling, I believe, of a more robust vision of sin and mercy than any abstract individualistic example. Because the point isn't whether a sin is bad in the abstract, but about one's impact on one's community – and what happens to them. There is joy in celebrating the restoration of the lost. The insider who kicked them out or keeps them out? Let's notice how little joy is offered in that.

With love,
Drew+

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FOR SUNDAY

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Collect

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Reading

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So Jesus told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer

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worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.

He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Reflection

The elements: lost, found, forgive, celebrate: these are essential to understand God's love for us. The sadness in the younger brother who assumes he doesn't deserve love and then, in the older brother who believes he does – this reveals how jaded and confused we are by the kind of grace Jesus describes, and how selfishly we police the concept of merit, the vision of deserving, the control we want to have over God's grace. All of it. And yet the father looks at his son who he thought was dead is standing before him, and the response, always, when we find whatever we have lost, is to celebrate. With crazy joy and thankfulness.

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