

**Luke 15:1-10**  
**St. Andrew's, Nogales**

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Why were the Pharisees and scribes grumbling about Jesus this time?

It appears that the company Jesus was keeping, tax collectors and sinners, shocked them.

And to make things even worse, we are told that the tax collectors and sinners were listening to Jesus. Remember that there is only one word in Hebrew for what are two separate concepts in English, to hear and to obey. In Hebrew to hear means to obey so in the context of this story it means that the tax collectors and sinners were experiencing some sort of repentance or conversion as they came to hear Jesus.

The Hebrew religious leaders did not take kindly to the repentance of such people because, according to the purity laws, they fell outside their definition of the kind of people who were redeemable.

And I expect that the scribes and Pharisees were provoked by the radical welcome, the radical hospitality, they were seeing on Jesus' part, in not only talking with, but eating with sinners and tax collectors.

In response to the reaction of the religious leaders, Jesus told three parables, two of which are included in today's lesson: The Parable of the lost sheep, and the Parable of the lost coin. The third is the story of the prodigal son, which we heard during the season of Lent this year.

Now there is much comfort to be found in these parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin.

Those who have wandered far away, those who are lost, can take great comfort in knowing that God is searching for them, that God loves them enough to leave 99 others behind to go looking for them.

I have preached these passages with that message many times. It is message that is very meaningful to me, as one who left my Christian roots for many years and was called back by other people. So I pray that those who seek comfort, healing and return to God from these parables find it.

But such well known parables are a challenge to preach on because we've heard them so many times that we often think we have already learned all that they have to teach us.

So it seems to me that it is important to stand back and look at the context in which Jesus tells these parables and search for other threads we may follow in this story.

Remember Jesus was traveling from one town to another throughout the countryside on his way to Jerusalem. He had recently been invited for a meal at the home of a leader of the Pharisees. And now large crowds were beginning to follow him and so the religious leaders were getting a little nervous and starting to grumble about all the tax collectors and sinners who were joining the crowds and coming near to Jesus.

That's when Jesus tells the parables. They are meant specifically for the religious leaders to hear, not the crowds. And that brings up the question of who are the real sinners in this story?

Those who are the real sinners in this story are the religious insiders. They are the ones being challenged by Jesus regarding the question of who is in and who is out.

On further reflection I would say that the parables are meant for those of us who are religious leaders, and leaders and members of our churches today. That means you and me.

Professor Penny Nixon challenges church leaders today by suggesting we are more comfortable in saving people than we are in actually welcoming them into our midst.

Saving someone focuses on the individual being saved, and don't misunderstand me, that is important.

However, welcoming others focuses on the church as a community, a community of welcome.

Taken in this context, the point of Jesus' parable is that the community is not complete until all are included and none are lost. I have to admit I certainly had not understood this story in this way before. (Nixon, Feasting on the Word, essay on Proper 19)

So the question arises in my mind: How can we apply this story to what is happening today in the Episcopal Church, the Anglican Communion, and the wider world?

The Episcopal Church has for some time been moving toward a stance of radical welcome to all. This includes people coming from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures. And in the last two decades it has meant the inclusion of gays and lesbians in all areas of the church life and leadership. When I was in seminary

about a fifth of the members of my class of 1995 were gays and lesbians. And that is why in recent years we are beginning to see the consecration of openly gay and lesbian people as bishops. And so we are hearing some grumbling, once again.

But can we take these stories and look at them in an even wider context? Yesterday was 9/11, September 11<sup>th</sup>, a date that our current generations will not forget. And the news this week has all been about the minister of an independent church in Florida who threatened to burn the Koran.

That issue is being talked about in terms of religious freedom here in the United States, and rightly so. As I mentioned in a sermon last month, the separation church and state was very important to our founding fathers, as many of them or their families had fled state sponsored religions in Europe. As I noted then, that included such groups as the Puritans and Quakers who were fleeing from our own ancestors in the faith, the Church of England. That's why the founding fathers didn't want a state sponsored religion, not even a Christian one.

But beyond the issue of the separation of church and state, I believe these stories also bring up issues within our related traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all of which claim that they descend from Abraham, our common ancestor in the faith.

A few weeks after 9/11 at my parish in Duluth we arranged a meeting between members of our youth group and some Islamic students studying at the University of Minnesota Duluth. We held it at a private home thinking it would help the Muslim students feel more comfortable. Everyone was pretty nervous upon arrival, and the Islamic students clustered together and our kids did the same. We invited all to sit in the large living room and it was hard to get the conversation going after everyone briefly introduced themselves. Finally one of our youth group leaders asked the Muslim students to tell a story from the Koran.

And after some hesitation, one of them began to tell the story of Abraham and Isaac, and all of a sudden you could see that our youth relaxed upon hearing a version of this story, which is common to the sacred texts of Jews and Christians also. And a dialogue began. We did not solve the world's problems, of course. But these young people began to see each other more as insiders than as outsiders to each other, somewhat like cousins perhaps.

We, Muslims, Christians and Jews, need to remind ourselves that our traditions share many stories in common, that we are all part of the Abrahamic tradition, and that we belong to one another, rather than letting the extremists of each of our traditions keep us apart and fighting wars with each other.

This is one of the greatest challenges of our time.

A number of the Bishops of the Anglican Communion, many in countries with sizeable Muslim populations, have spoken out this week. I quote only two.

In a statement written in Arabic, the Bishop of Egypt, Dr. Mouneer Anis\* said, "We strongly denounce any attempt to insult sacred texts that belong to our Muslim friends. We condemn the attempt to burn the Quran by one of the American pastors....We grieve at the growth of the spirit of fanaticism and extremism in USA and other parts of the world. We appeal to all followers of religions who love peace, to work together in order to overcome all the misconceptions, in order to develop a spirit of love and peaceful co-existence. We here in Egypt are proud of the friendly spirit that prevails among Muslims and Christians who have lived together for fourteen centuries."

The Rt. Rev. Suheil S. Dawani, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem, said, "Our faith must include mutual respect for each other and does not allow us to do such ugly things," he said. "This damages the interfaith work and the relationships we have, which are built on the values we share in common with one another."

Finally, do you remember what happens at the end of each of the parables Jesus tells the religious leaders? The shepherd and the woman and the father of the prodigal son each call together their friends and neighbors to join in a celebration.

When all are included the celebration begins.

Let us pray for and work for that day of celebration.

Amen.

Nixon Reference from Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4

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speak out against proposed Quran burning  
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