

“This Man Receives Sinners . . .”

3 September 2017

Texts: Luke 15:11-32; Ephesians 2:1-6, 12-19

This morning I want us to exult together in the consistency and the continuity of Jesus’ ministry, the ministry which took place on earth and which continues in heaven! First, the consistency: everything that Jesus did, every miracle and every healing, everything that Jesus spoke (his sermons, discourse and even the parables) are all aimed in the same direction. **This man receives sinners and eats with them.** (Lk 15:2) While on earth, Jesus was continuously extending grace, hospitality of spirit and salvation to lost sinners. He welcomed them into his house and, by way of extension into the household of God. Ephesians 2:19 affirms as much: **So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,** (I will be emphasizing this latter claim **members of the household of God** today—we will save **fellow citizens** for another day). Jesus saved us so that we might be reconciled with the Father and come home to God both in the here and now and even forever more. And that, of course, is the continuity!

D M Stanley (*Catholic Quarterly Review*, 23, 1961, pp. 37-8) called our attention to the similarities between the parable of “The Prodigal Son” and Ephesians 2—so I cannot take any credit for the scriptural lead. But that suggestion triggered not only a study of Luke 15, but laid bare for me this link between Paul’s epistle and the parable of Jesus. So, the consistency and continuity of which I speak are not limited to Jesus’ ministry—but point to a vital partnership between our Master, His apostles and us. Meaning this, that we, too are to be known as those who **receive sinners and eat with them.** Here is warrant for continued table fellowship which is home-based and allows for full and fruitful spiritual conversations about what matters most and least in this world, in our lives. Entertaining with a purpose—someone ought to write a book about that! Incidentally, I found a minimum of six, major thematic connection—of the sort that struck DM Stanley—in my brief study of relevant passages.

On a personal note, this pursuit also led to several exchanges with my wife that were inspiring. As a result I preached on this material in jail. (It went very well with significant engagement on the part of the ladies attending.) There I expanded somewhat on this **receives sinners** (where?) and **eats (and drinks) with them** (What?and How?) piece. Two significant passages in Mark 2 (as well as Luke 15) describes Jesus as fellowshiping with sinners. Mark 2:1 describes Jesus as doing this **at home** and Mark 2:15 records **As Jesus was reclining at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples . . .** enrich our picture of Jesus’ home-based ministry. The implication is that his home in Capernaum was multi-roomed (common among prosperous city dwellers in his day) and, while not necessarily palatial, somewhat spacious. Remember, the were large crowds at these home meetings where preaching, teaching and hearings transpired. This may appear a very mundane form of redemptive work, especially when compared with the work of the cross, however, the same redemptive purpose dominated **which is to find and save lost sinners.** And, for the sake of reinforcing my theme of consistency and continuity, I would point out that Jesus is still welcoming saved, lost sinners home to his Father’s house in heaven—continuing the same work he began on earth while among us.

And that, my friends, is incredibly wonderful news.

So, in order to convey a sense of all this concisely, I will cite Mark 2:15-17:

15 And as he reclined at table in his house, many *g* (Mk 2:15) tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. 16 And *h* (Acts 4:5; 23:9) the scribes of *1* (and) the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, *g* (Mark 2:5) “Why does he eat & drink—*some manuscripts add*) with tax collectors and sinners?” 17 And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. *i* (Luke 15:7, John 9:39) I came not to call the righteous, *j* (1 Ti 1:15) but sinners.”

I will let this speak for itself (on the homey features) and simply draw your attention to Jesus’ direct statement to his critics: **Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.** In Luke 15, Jesus resorts to parabolic instruction instead of simply stating the truth conversationally to his critics (the **grumblers**). The meaning, and intent, are exactly the same in both instances which means that the statement here works well as a summary of the parable(s) used later. Luke 19:10: **10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost** demonstrates, coming after the “The Prodigal Son” that Jesus didn’t abandon direct address—he used either approach strategically. We should imitate that, too.

Sin and forgiveness and homecoming are central themes in Ephesians 2 and in Luke 15—yes, in the “Prodigal Son” but also in the two preceding parables *offered by Jesus to the mixed crowd—a crowd of sinners and the scribes and Pharisees, the inner and outer circles for Mark and Luke alike*. Paul, in case you have forgotten, would have been numbered among the **grumblers** *whom Jesus addresses throughout these exchanges*. Observation: whether we are in the narrative section, or the parable section, what Jesus is pressing home includes sin and forgiveness, to insiders and outsiders alike. And all of this: healing, controversy, hospitality and hostility, all taken together is foundational for the substance of Ephesians 2. Furthermore, every instance we’ve mentioned is home-based, transpiring within the bounds of a household, Jesus’ home or the home of distraught father in the parable. Every parable that Jesus tells in Luke 15 is home-based—that is not a coincidence.

Problem: But Paul was not present for the healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12), or the meal which apparently followed the call of Levi (Mark 2:15-17) or, as I would have it, for the gathering at Jesus home recorded in Luke 15:1-2. So, to the best of our knowledge, Paul, who would have been known as Saul, did not attend any of these sessions. Solution: And yet it is very clear that out of his tutelage by Jesus *the same substance/message was conveyed to him—the same core mission*. And that was the point that I think DM Stanley was making by drawing our attention to the parallels between Luke 15’s, “The Prodigal Son,” and Ephesians 2!

I want to set some of those parallels, those similarities before you—so that you can appreciate both passages better *as a result—be empowered to judge for yourself*

whether such a dependency is real. The “two sons” parable is part of a series of four connected parables told by Jesus to the skeptical and disapproving Pharisees and Scribes in attendance, listening in and **grumbling**, **“This man receives sinners and eats with them.”** (Luke 15:2) Ephesians 2:1, 4, 6, 13 and 19 are the points of correspondence under consideration. Let’s begin with Jesus’ stated purpose for the parables Mark 4:10-12 (ESV):

10 And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11 And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret¹ of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables. . .

So he told them (the grumblers) **this parable.** (v.3) Now for a little background, more than just the hostility noted about the grumblers!

The first parable is of the lost lamb, the one (lost) as compared to the ninety-nine (found). The shepherd, in this parable, leaves the ninety-nine safely **in the open country, and go(es) after the one that is lost.** (v. 4) He persists in his search until the lost sheep is located.

And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” Notice the acts of inclusion, the home-based sharing, the celebration of blessing which characterize God’s household. **Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons** (the righteous Pharisees and Scribes, if they didn’t wince at this, completely missed what their attitude towards sinners was expressing about their pride and sin condition!) **who need no repentance. *Who need no repentance?! Do you actually know anyone in that category?!*** I don’t. See it? Sin, forgiveness and at home.

¹ "Secret" seems to be a poor translation for the underlying Greek word - μυστήριον (mysterion). The English derivative "mystery" - as chosen by the King James translators - seems to be a much better fit. The Greek word for "secret" (as in nothing is secret, Luke 8:17) is ἀπόκρυφος (apokryphos), from which the English word "apocryphal" is derived. *Faith is the key that opens the mystery!*

Luke and Matthew refer to mysterion in the plural:

It is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given (Matthew 13:11)

Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God (Luke 8:10)

Mark uses the singular:

Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God (Mark 4:11)

"Mystery" conveys something deeper, I think, than something that is simply "secret". A secret can be uncovered (cf. Mark 4:22), but a mystery must be discovered. Furthermore, I think that something that has been secret can be comprehended immediately upon its exposure, whereas a mystery requires something more of the person comprehending it. Christ taught at the Sermon on the Mount that in order to see God, one must be pure of heart (Matthew 5:8).

The "mystery" or "mysteries" that the Evangelists are referring to in the above passages are the teachings of Christ themselves - the didache (Mark 4:2). These teachings are not "secret", since all heard them, but they were "mysteries" - not at all understood by them that are without (Mark 4:11), that is, those who were ill-disposed towards Christ. These would see, but not perceive, and hear, but not understand (Mark 4:12).

My goodness, if we were to think that *receiving sinners* was bad—this “celebration” must be far, far worse. Yes, it is sensible *to seek the lost*, and it is the responsible thing to do (if you are a caring shepherd, or if you have any heart of compassion towards those who are ‘lost’) but above these two “duties” lies the close, physical and intimate nature of being a shepherd. You remember those Pharisees and scribes, who are shepherd-type leaders among the people? They were content to let the lost be lost, and to have nothing to do with them. Eww sheep, dirty—nasty business, this shepherding work, worse than . . . blue collar laborers! See how easy it is to fall into patterns of cultural contempt? The lost sheep was regarded more as deplorable and not as desperately lost, in danger, or vulnerable.

When sinners are looked at contemptuously, it is really challenging to stir evangelists up compassionate outreach, interaction and witnessing.

The second parable transpires entirely within a woman’s household. She has ten silver coins, and one goes missing. This “loss” arrests her; or, gets her attention. She doesn’t move on (oh, well!), life as usual. Nor does she immediately suspect that she has been robbed, supposing that some thief has taken her coin! No, she initiates a search of her own world. **She lights a lamp and sweeps the house . . . seek(ing) diligently until she finds it.** (v. 8) For those with an aversion to housecleaning, this parable might be just as convicting as the first, remember, related to shepherding being dirty; sheep are often stupid or senseless. But Jesus isn’t banking on laziness, nor a messy house to make his point. *It’s the money, people.* Keep your eye on the coin. It is the “precious thing” that has been misplaced. **And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors**—they might have been the same folks who just at the happy shepherd’s house! A busy night on the town. She says, **Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.** (v. 9) We see that she does not blame the coin for *losing itself* and she does not disown the coin at all— *it remains her coin throughout the parable.* So the lost sinner is not someone else’s sinner any more than her coin becomes someone else’s coin. This *continuity of ownership*, from the owner’s point of view, is yet another thread of continuity in these teachings. The shepherd’s lost sheep, and the lost coin are not disavowed *and they, the lost, take no responsibility for their lostness—because they can’t.* It is not until we get to the third parable that we see the lost person as a freely accountable, moral agent. Jesus leaves off talking about things, and starts talking to us as human beings.

My point is that certain folk see sinners not as primarily lost, but as primarily **culpable**. They are sinners because they chose to be sinners—it’s all their fault (It isn’t!) and, consequently, those sinners deserve the mess they are in. Why even bother with them, they like their messes?! And, sadly, this seems to fit some sinners who do actually acclimate themselves to their sin. They don’t “see” themselves as “lost,” they are just living an alternative life-style. *They are free!* (But in fact they aren’t free.) They simply don’t choose to live like us, or with us; so they say. So there. But Jesus doesn’t allow this kind of rationalization, or delusion to derail Him from saving the lost. He rescues the heedless, the confused and the defiant *because He is the One who decides who is “lost” and who isn’t! He seeks, he finds and he recovers—either directly, or through us!*

I think that something like these distinctions informs the paradigm shift between parables one and two and the third parable, the parable of “the two lost sons” which I prefer to “The Prodigal Son”—and, for a moment I want us to consider that a better title for this parable might be accurately “the parable of the two lost sinners”—for both the younger and the elder brother are equally, but distinctively lost. However, for the sake of good order, I want to pause and remind everyone that I am exploring the thematic continuity of Ephesians 2: 1, 4, 6, 13 and 19 with Luke 15:9-32 and we have just now arrived at the threshold of the centrally relevant parable of the “two lost sinners.”

So, as we knock on the door of this third household—remembering the houses of the shepherd and the good woman who had lost her coin—we see that Jesus slipped something very significant into the script twice. Before he introduces the father of these wretched two sons, he puts in the ears of his audience these words: **Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.** (v. 7) That is the kind of twist that hooks a listener. Now, Paul, if he were present, as one of those Pharisees in attendance (which I can reasonably assure you, he was not) would have had a very different take on Jesus’ teaching. Here I think is the implied message: “I am taking time with sinners, who are more lost than bad evil people, *in hopes that through association and even fellowship with them some might be brought to repentance.* If they are loved, valued and wanted, they are more likely to be open to the good news of forgiveness of sins, and salvation by faith, or even entering the kingdom of God with joy. Remember, the shepherd and the woman responded with joy to their mutual recoveries—and, even **joy before the angels of God** (v.10) is joined to v. 7. So, on a very accessible level, we see that Jesus, compatibly, was motivated by the **joy set before** him, by the anticipation of saved souls through His ministry of redeeming love! We should be motivated by joy, too: we should be both joyful and hopeful.

We are, as I’ve suggested, even at a threshold. Ephesians 2:4 reads **But God being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses** (and sin!) **made us alive together with Christ.** Bingo. There it is! **The same love motivation** that drew Jesus **to receive sinners** is both heaven-sent and apparent in His ministry. This picture of God, **rich in mercy**, and compassionate towards us, **because of the great love**, is manifested in the parable by the father of the “two lost sinners.” Yes, the father in the parable loves his sons greatly—even as our Father in heaven loves us. So, why if he is such a loving father, is there so much hostility, division, anger, envy and self-destruction? That is actually a very good question, now isn’t it? And the answer is “sin.” *Sin interferes between father and son—creates mistrust, spawns resentment and suspicion where none is warranted.* This broken world, this sinned corrupted existence is a place where sheep get lost, coins get misplaced and rebellious children set about getting themselves in difficult, sinful and compromising situations—I was going to say, real “pickles,” but the term seems a tetch too light.

The journey into sin, wickedness and depravity, circumscribed by the younger son’s rejection of his father’s love—is also a rejection of faith, home and upbringing. We know, by implication, that the younger son wasn’t raised for spring break! For worldliness and open debauchery. He was raised in a household where people were careful with each others, careful about money and moral integrity. The elder son’s rant tells us as much. A tad unloving, but probably a horrid example of moral exposure. His

brother's trip into a far country (Eph. 2:13), wasn't far enough to avoid the gossipy news that filtered back about **squandering wealth**, the high party life and prostitution (Eph. 2:1). I am not sure it was possible to get that far from home ever, any time.

There was a man who had two sons. (v. 11) *It doesn't say they had a great home life!* In fact, the younger son's request for his inheritance prematurely, was taken as worse than an insult to his father. It was a death wish. "Hey, Pops, I wish you were dead. So, give the money now." The stunning thing is that the father complied with his wishes. **He divided the property between them.** (v.12) Note: here is a father who holds nothing back! He gives everything away *and if even that wasn't enough, he would have given even more!* A third went to the younger and two-thirds, if I understand the inheritance practice accurately. Upon the father's actual decease the elder son would come into everything remaining after the first disbursement. It is important to point this out because the older son, in his bitterness, says, **you never gave me so much as a goat to party with my friends.** No, Dad didn't give you a goat, he gave you the whole farm! Such blinding ingratitude. Who would behave like that—like either of that's?! The answer is: we do. All sinners are guilty of turning on God, of treasonous ingratitude and we all want to go our way and please ourselves. And, yes, we fixate on the misbehavior of others (those awful sinners) so as to feel better about our own transgressions! We suspect God of being stingy, of being a kill-joy when what we end up doing is reckless, wasteful and scandalous.

And God's response is likewise so generous! Sends His Son to find the lost, rescue the perishing, assist the helpless. Who but God could have found this boy, brought him to himself and steered him homeward?! **But while he** (the younger son) **was still along way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.** (v. 20) And, for goodness sake, weren't we just saying how awful it was that Jesus **received sinners** and now, imagine, he pictures God as **embracing and kissing them.** Eww, and double eww. How decidedly lacking in compassion we humans can tend to be! It gets even deeper here, for the son has come to himself at considerable personal cost; he appears to be filled with self-hated and rejection—overwhelmed by his sense of shame and guilt: **Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you!** Yes, son, yes you have. You have earned your self-condemnation! All of it—indeed, it hardly goes far enough! BUT the father responds incredibly (Eph. 2:6)—**raised up, honored, seated with Him: Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him** (what a stunning picture of **love covering a multitude of sins**) **and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.** (v. 22—compare with Eph. 2:19, **saints and members of the household of God!!**) All the insignia of recovery, restoration and acceptance *are put on him*—all aimed at the core of this son's self-wounded, sin-broken heart. *There is no disowning(it would be just), no accusation (it would be fair), no condemnation (it would be deserved) because the father's love was willing to over all that!* Instead he receives welcoming mercy. Jesus is saying through him to us, "Look you don't get what you deserve—you get mercy!" Hurry home while the door of mercy is still wide open. Believe the Father's love. **I have come to save the lost.**

This my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate (v. 24) If we imagine that the older brother was thrilled with all

this, we imagine him more found than he is. As it is, he, **out in the field**, dutifully (but resentfully) doing all that his father “expected” of him—was so dead in his sullen servitude, so jealous of his profligate brother (talk about envying the wicked!!) that he needs life more than his happy sibling who has found it! The father says **It was fitting.**” But he is shrieking, “No. No. No, it’s not. He should be punished .Justice, give me justice.” REALLY? Goodness, both sons want their father dead at some point in the parable—indeed that is where things stand when the parable closes.

What’s with this kingdom of God business? Is the picture of God in the parable of the “two sinners,” now become the tale of “one forgiven, and one not forgiven sinner” actually the way things work? Is our job to **receive** sinners in hopes that they might be found, won, saved for the sake of the Merciful One who would not hold back even His own Beloved Son?

We hear **dead in our sins**, following the **course of this world**, we admit to **squandering**, to rebellion and to **exile**, to being in **a far country when it comes to fellowship with God**, even to faithlessness. Lord, please make us more faithful, merciful, more like Jesus.

Amen