

Yr. C, Proper 19
September 15, 2019
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1510 Words

Lessons: Exodus 32:7-14
Psalm 51:1-11
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

So, I tell you this parable. Which one of *you*, having a box of chocolates—and not just *any* chocolates, but dark chocolates...73% Cacao infused chocolates—(which one of you), having lost this beautiful, golden box of decadence would not turn your *house* upside down to find it?

Exactly what I suspected! Those of you who are nodding—the truth has set you free! Those of you pretending not to care...*we all know better!*

We *understand* the parables of Jesus because we also *live* these parables of Jesus. We know—viscerally—how it feels to lose something...something we value...something we treasure...or something we *need!*

I just *knew* I brought those chocolates home on Sunday evening—a sweet gift from a saint of God. Now, I could not say for sure where I set the box down, but I really thought I remembered bringing it from St. Peter's. "What if I set it down beside my car in the church parking lot when I got out my keys?" I thought. "They will be melted...ruined. I'll just drive back over to the church and check."

In the Gospel according to St. Luke, Jesus is completely surrounded. He is *surrounded* by losers—tax collectors who had lost all respect, and lots of sinners (not the garden variety-type of 'misdemeanor' sinners, but the real conspicuous-looking, conspicuous-sounding, and conspicuous-smelling sinners who had lost everything).

These people were hanging on every word that Jesus spoke. He was speaking their language...the language of losing it, whatever 'it' might be. They wanted desperately to hear some encouragement they could trust. They needed to hear that 'all was *not* lost,' even though it seemed that way.

Predictably, there were also respectable and upright people standing nearby. Do you know what respectable, upright people say to sinners? Nothing! Because they don't talk to those kinds of people; they talk *about* those kinds of people *among themselves*.

And the way you know you are slipping down that slippery judgmental slope is when you find yourself grumbling about other people you look down upon. When we start grumbling about what others *don't deserve*, chances are good that we are *not* standing with Jesus and his friends. When we find ourselves grumbling about people whom we suppose to be beyond our definition of respectable or beneath our standard of acceptable, chances are good that we are not standing with Jesus and his followers.

The good news is that the chocolates were not melting in the church parking lot. They also were not left behind on the desk in my office or the bookcase in the hallway or the counter in the copier room—all reasonable places where I have left behind things before. I felt like the woman in the parable Jesus told to the losers *and the grumblers*. I felt like the woman searching carefully for the lost coin. It sort of becomes a mission at some point.

When we talked about this at the vestry meeting Monday night, one person commented about the value of time vs. the value of a single coin. Good point—it's not practical to waste time digging for coins between our sofa cushions. Another vestry member pointed out that it was 10% of the woman's wealth. Another good point—how would you feel about losing 10% of your retirement accounts in a bear market?

Now, I want to take that question and shift it just a little in order to be as provocative as Jesus was. How would you feel about giving up 10%...to the mission of Jesus Christ—which means seeking and serving *other* undeserving *people* in his Name?

How does it feel to offer a *true* ‘sacrifice’ of praise and thanksgiving to our Savior...who keeps leaving the 99 good sheep in order to save the lost one? Does it make you want to grumble about what other people might be getting at our expense?

(Well, that is how the Pharisees felt about Jesus and all those losers circled around him.) It’s easy to feel this way. It might even be *normal* to feel this way...which is *why* Jesus told these parables out loud—not only to encourage the losers who surrounded him, but also to challenge the upright who were standing off and grumbling about *them*.

And so, I tried *not* to sound like I was grumbling...or even suspicious when I was sitting at the table with someone who shall remain nameless...and I asked my wife, “Have you seen the box of chocolates that someone gave me?” I tried *not to place* too much emphasis on those last words, “**gave me.**”

She smiled a big, broad smile. (Did I mention that these included dark chocolates?) “They are in the refrigerator,” Kim said.

Having cleaned my plate, I excused myself from the table, opened the fridge, and glimpsed a *corner* of the box otherwise well-concealed behind several stalks of broccoli...which is probably another parable altogether!

Not to make myself out as a hero of my own story, but I *did do* the right thing—the right and good and joyful thing, always and everywhere—giving thanks...thankfully giving...thankfully sharing...celebrating and delighting in the amazing grace of God which is clearly presented to us by Jesus!

Here’s the thing I want you to catch about these stories...and not just *these parables*, but pretty much everything Jesus says and does in chapters 14 and 15 of Luke’s Gospel. You see, 2/3 of the way into this Gospel according to St. Luke, it’s not really about the ‘lost and found’ as much as it is about partying with God.

These ‘Party Chapters’ in Luke’s gospel involve real people choosing to celebrate and rejoice and share with God and all the other undeserving guests... and other people choosing to ignore God’s invitation, standing off, and grumbling about the people *we think* should have to suffer or wait or lose or remain lost.

Paul confessed to Timothy in today’s epistle that he was only able to see God’s mercy when he began to recognize himself to be just as unworthy as anyone else.

St. Paul was probably the inspiration behind John Newton’s lyrics: “I once was lost, but now I’m found; twas blind, but now I see.” You see, John Newton made a good living off of selling black people. He looked down on them. He believed that they were not as deserving of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as he was.

Fortunately, Newton—like St. Paul—had a conversion experience. He discovered that there is an amazing grace that we are invited to receive *and share* with others, rejoicing and celebrating with God and all the other undeserving people whom God loves.

One of the things I love about St. Peter’s is how you are not afraid to seek and serve Christ in other—*undeserving*—people.

- You’re not afraid to proclaim by word and example the Good News that God wants to rejoice and celebrate with *all* people, not just the respectable ones.
- You’re not afraid to strive for justice and peace, because you know what it means to respect the dignity of every human being.

- You're not afraid to persevere in resisting evil, especially when it is violent and oppressive toward the vulnerable who are always friends of Jesus.
- I believe we are not afraid because we choose to rejoice and celebrate with God and other undeserving people in the apostles' teaching, in fellowship, in the Holy Eucharist, and in our prayers...day by day and week by week.

We have a reputation in this town, I'm thankful to say. For almost 50 years, St. Peter's has been building a reputation as a community of faith which rejoices and celebrates not only in loving God, but in loving our neighbors as we do ourselves. St. Peter's has been building a reputation as a community that serves other undeserving people in Christ's name...and at our expense.

Our reputation is summed up in our mission statement painted in big letters on the wall out front—*We want to be* “One Body of Transformation, embracing all people through Christ's love.”

I want to invite you to the Faith Forum next Sunday morning at 9:30 in Stockstill Hall. St. Peter's vestry and Feasibility Study Committee want to present a vision to you about equipping ourselves for the next 50 years of mission and service in this place.

For months, the Feasibility Study Committee has been analyzing the most pressing needs and ministry priorities of our community, and translating that into a vision. I am thrilled to say that this group of leaders completed their task with absolute consensus at every turn.

And last Monday night your vestry accepted their recommendation unanimously. Dear people, the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not only that the lost get found, but also that God's desire is to rejoice and celebrate with us.

It is a good and joyful thing—always and everywhere—giving thanks...thankfully giving...thankfully sharing...celebrating and delighting in the amazing grace of God.

Amen.