

People Who Live in Glass Houses...Shouldn't!

[Text - Luke 15:1-10]

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In today's New Testament reading, we hear Jesus' religious contemporaries complaining about how he welcomes *tax-collectors* and *sinner*s. Admittedly, those two groups can distress a lot of people. This time of the year, it's not uncommon for some of *us* to feel a bit uneasy around tax-collectors. And throughout the year, many religious people find *sinner*s deeply disturbing; yet that's not how it is with Jesus. Jesus is quite comfortable with rubbing elbows, breaking bread, and warmly embracing all kinds of people; especially those who society in general and self-righteous people in particular tend to judge and reject. So in response to the grumbling Jesus gives his adversaries - and us - three marvelous parables about the Holy One's tremendous love and deep concern for people who are regarded as being "less" or "lost".

The first story is about a man who has 100 sheep. One sheep gets lost, so the man leaves the others to go look for it. When he finds it, he picks it up and joyfully carries it home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the one that was lost!" The second story is about a woman who has 10 valuable coins. One coin gets lost, so the woman sweeps her house from top to bottom until she finds it. Then she invites her friends and neighbors to celebrate with her. The third story is a much longer one about a devil-may-care young man, his careful and jealous older brother, and their generous and compassionate father - a parable known as "The Prodigal Son". [But that's a story for another day.]

In today's stories, Jesus lifts-up the Divine Desire to actively "seek the lost". Now I realize that the expression "seek the lost" may

make some of us feel a bit uneasy. Often when people talk about seeking [or *saving*] “the lost”, they project an arrogant image of trying to convert others, who [unlike *them*] are headed-to-hell-in-a-handcart! Yet this isn’t how Jesus portrays it. According to his teachings, and his interactions with those whose lives are flawed and fractured, the *lost* are people who simply need help in finding their way. And as one who truly appreciates Seri’s step by-step-directions when traveling in unfamiliar territory, I completely understand the need for help and guidance. This doesn’t mean I’m a bad person; it means that I know what it’s like to be disoriented, and to end up in the wrong place. Apparently the same thing can happen with sheep, and coins.

Actually, it’s rather rare for sheep to run-away from their shepherds. Even simple little sheep know that the shepherd is the one who watches-out for them, makes sure they have food and water, and protects them from danger. So it’s highly unlikely that sheep would get lost on purpose. Nor is it likely that a shepherd would try to track-down a sheep screaming, “You get back here, you baaaad sheep!” That would only make the sheep run faster and farther. A good shepherd will calmly and carefully look for that lost one, perhaps whistling a cheerful, familiar tune, to let that sheep know that its care-giver is close-by.

With the story of the lost coin, we can safely say that the coin didn’t *choose* to get lost, or run away. We can run out of money, but our money doesn’t literally “run out” on us! And we can be fairly certain that the woman didn’t try to chase-down that coin shouting “Come back here, you baaaad penny!” No, she wisely lights a lamp, and methodically begins cleaning her house, until she finds the missing coin. And when she finds it, she gathers her friends to celebrate; because that precious thing which was lost, has now been found.

So what might all this mean, in regards to *people* - especially people of Faith who may have a vested interest in this notion of seeking the lost? It means that our motive for “seeking” should never be one of self-righteous judgement or condescending condemnation, but rather genuine compassion and concern. If the ultimate goal is to bring the one who is lost, safely home, then the approach we use should reflect this. We may whistle, but we won’t shout and scold. We can clean-up our own houses, but we won’t cast aspersions the living conditions of those who are lost. And when the one who is lost, is finally found, and safely back home, we will truly be happy! And we will joyfully celebrate together!

Now admittedly, it can sometimes be difficult to sincerely celebrate when one who was lost, returns to the fold. We may be suspicious, wondering if that turn-around is truly genuine. But a more complex reason that we may have trouble welcoming those “lost” wanderers, is that they can remind us that we, too, might just as easily lose our way. Sometimes the reason we are so quick to point out the faults and failings of others, is so that we won’t have to look too closely at our own. This is where Jesus’ example can be extremely helpful. Through his words - and his actions - Jesus clearly demonstrates that our Divine Source truly desires what is best for us *all*. And the overwhelming abundance of Divine Love clearly shows us that we don’t have to compete with one another in order to secure a place at the Table.

In today’s political climate of heightened divisiveness and discord, Christ’s clear call for inclusion, unity and compassion is a welcomed relief. And the warm welcome that we can extend in Christ’s name - to partake of the One Bread and Cup - is an unmistakable sign, that *no one* is to be left out. In our Continuing Testament, Eric Barreto puts it this way: “As long as the one is lost, the 99 are incomplete. As long as one of our sisters or brothers is broken by the world, cast aside as irrelevant, called a

sinner by the rest of us, then we are all at a loss, and God's heart is broken. God will never stop searching and reaching for the one, because God's love is too wide, God's grace is too deep." Think of it this way: To a good shepherd, each sheep is equally precious; so any that are lost become a top priority. And if a shepherd cares that much about simple little sheep, imagine how much our Divine Creator cares for us peculiar little people!