

Proper 19 – 16 Pentecost – Year C – September 12, 2010
Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14, 12-17; 1 Timothy 1: 12-17; Luke 15:1-10
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The movie *Amistad* tells the story of a group of Africans who are kidnapped from their home in Sierra Leone and sold into slavery. While en route, the ship is intercepted by a U.S. vessel off the coast of New York and the Africans imprisoned while a determination is made as to their status. In one of the early scenes a handful of grave Christian abolitionists, singing dolefully, hand out Bibles to the prisoners, who are frankly skeptical of anyone who follows such a joyless god.

Today we find Jesus surrounded by crowds of people. Amongst the crowd, there are Pharisees and scribes, religious insiders who consider themselves righteous, but still shadow Jesus' movements and listen to His teachings. They are grumbling about the company Jesus is keeping, and even worse, with whom He shares mealtimes. Then there are the tax collectors and sinners who have come near to hear Jesus speak. Today's lectionary selection offers us two of the three stories with a lost and found theme. The first parable is about the loss of one sheep from one hundred, the next about the loss of one coin from ten, and the final story not in this week's Gospel reading is about the loss of one son from a family of two brothers.

The good news is that in each story all that is lost is found again. Perhaps hinting that in God's economy nothing and no one can ever be truly lost from God's sight, whether or not we experience the feeling of being lost, or of losing something of great value. In fact, the lost sheep and the lost coin play no role in actually being found. It is the pure diligence of the shepherd who brings the sheep back to the fold, and the hard work of the woman that results in finding the lost coin. Common to each of the stories is the rejoicing and celebration of God, first represented as a shepherd, then as a woman, and finally as a concerned father. There is a strong measure of the joy, rejoicing and celebration that is characteristic of God's love and compassion, God's bountiful care and mercy for all. The parables are Jesus' extended response to the grumbling Pharisees, concluding each time with an invitation to the Pharisees and scribes to join in the celebration of all who are found by God, who hear God's voice, and return.

Throughout the Gospel of Luke, those who "hear" Jesus are those who are willing to turn their lives around, repent, and return to God. The Pharisees and scribes are rather like the prophet Jonah, who did not like the fact that the Ninevites heard God's word spoken through him and repented of their sins. Jonah complains to God, "for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jonah 4:2). There is nothing unusual about those who are insiders resenting or feeling threatened by outsiders. In this case, the sinners and tax collectors have drawn near to Jesus to listen to Him. The Pharisees and scribes are much too used to being the center of attention, well-respected around town, and having the inside track on invitations to dinner. No wonder they are feeling threatened that the popular and charismatic teacher, Jesus, who has dined with several of the Pharisees recently, is now dining with sinners and tax collectors. It is the latter group that are now near to Jesus, and the former group feel like their place of nearness, power and influence, is being usurped by the unrighteous and unwelcome intrusion of the most unworthy group of people possible. This kind of thing has probably happened to all of us in one way or another. We retire from work after a highly successful career, where we held a senior position in the organization, and suddenly we are outside the inner circle of power. We lose our job, and suddenly we stop receiving invitations to dinner from former co-workers. We step down from public office, and we wonder why our phone hardly ever rings anymore. Our children have grown up and now have families of their own, they move away, and we find that our place in their lives becomes less and less significant. At some point, we are all going to find ourselves feeling like displaced persons, standing on the fringes of life, looking in at a new group at the hub. Our power feels diminished, we become more and more invisible, and the safety of our position in the world feels threatened. What is Jesus saying to the grumblers who have placed themselves in exile in the sanctuary of their self-righteousness? Is God saying the same thing that She said Jonah? Along the lines of, "I love you and always will. Without loving you less, I have

enough love to share with these others as well. Even those that in your blindness you judge unworthy, I have reason to rejoice because they now listen to my voice. Won't you join our celebration?"

God will seek us out wherever we hide, wherever we go. God works hard to extend His loving arms around us with the care of a shepherd or a parent, and the tight grasp of a woman holding on to the coin that will buy food to feed her family. You and I are of immeasurable worth and value to God. There is nothing, not one thing, or even many things that we can do to hide from God, to be unworthy of God's love, or unforgivable. The embrace of Jesus on the cross is all-encompassing. Jesus died for the sins of the whole world – no exceptions. Our salvation, by God's grace and our faith in Christ, is about power. It is about God's saving power applied to every individual. Some religious groups also like to trade in power – focusing on salvation, with much less emphasis on discipleship and community. On the other hand, the hospitality of the righteous, or the welcome extended by the Body of Christ is much more demanding because it is about intimacy and community. It is about rejoicing and welcoming all as equals, suspending our seemingly endless desire to judge and exclude others, especially those who are different or seem to threaten us in other ways. Jesus is seen by the grumblers as being indiscriminate, or as one commentator puts it, "promiscuous", in His generous welcome to all, and His choice of meal companions. Jesus' behavior effectively demolishes the boundaries that have always delineated the insiders from the outsiders. He shows us all who is going to be at the heavenly banquet table, and invites us all to share in God's joy that the community is gathered in unity and fellowship, with no lost souls.

Through Jesus' parables, we are learning something else about God – who is portrayed as both male and female, filled to overflowing with love, and diligent in seeking out all Her children – yet who is also the God of boundless compassion and mercy, and who challenges our judgmentalism. Would that each of us engage with God-like ardor in the hard work of getting out of our personal notions of worthiness and righteousness, to embrace all God's children. Would that everyone would search as diligently in the dark recesses of our hearts sweeping away cultural paradigms of power, and seeing the face of Christ in everyone we meet. Would that we all allow God to cleanse us of our judgmentalism, and open our eyes to see the abundance of God's love and blessings. This hard work would be like true repentance that welcomes the Holy Spirit's guidance setting us right with God, and changing our hearts and minds to align with God's will. Would that we give ourselves over to this work joyfully, knowing that God desires only the very best for us all.

All who heard the parables are surrounded by God's love and care, just as we are today. These stories are not told to bring sinners to repentance. Jesus is inviting us all to appreciate the vastness of God's love. God is always happy to find us going out joyfully to share the Good News and continue Christ's work of reconciliation. If we grumble and gripe about who is in and who is out our words and deeds tell God that we find Her expansive mercy offensive. If we cannot rejoice with God and share the banquet with everyone, we reveal that our relationships are based on human merit, and not God's compassion. As redeemed sinners, if we cannot celebrate and welcome others to our community of faith, then we are excluding ourselves from God's grace. According to minister, Penny Nixon, our "[t]rue repentance happens when our minds are changed to such a degree that we cannot see a community as whole until all are included and none are 'lost'". Quite contrary to the gloomy demeanor of the Christian protesters in the movie, we follow a God who is bursting with joy, seeking to forgive and restore all, to welcome all to the banquet, and to celebrate with all the host of heaven.

So, are you ready to party?

Amen.