

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus upends the commonplace idea that religious communities are only meant to be places of moral excellence and respectability. Clean up your act, the theory goes, and then you'll be welcome in Christian community.

But the stories we hear today move in the other direction: God seeks out the lost, not the found – that is, God pursues precisely the ones whose acts aren't "cleaned up."¹ And it's the inclusion of all of us that is the sign of God in our midst.

Such is the case in the parables from today's Gospel.

Jesus was gathered once again with people of all strata – we are told that tax collectors and sinners came near to listen to him, but the Pharisees and scribes were also there with him (though grumbling at the other company he kept.)

The Greek word used for **listen** in this passage is better translated as **hear**, and this is important, because for the writer of Luke's gospel, **hearing** Jesus is a sign of repentance and conversion.

¹ *Salt Project's* Lectionary Commentary.

Hence the grumbling; hearing the teachings of Jesus could lead to repentance and conversion of those who were deemed outside of the community. Jesus was once again erasing boundaries in his effort to build inclusive community, offering grace to **everyone**. And to drive home this point, he told these parables.

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?

Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?

Given the context of the scene in which Jesus told these parables, it is easy to see the tax collectors and sinners as the lost sheep and coin in need of saving.

But what about this? What if what Jesus was teaching all those present about, was what it means to be the **community of God**?

Authentic community happens when everyone shows up – and not only shows up but is welcomed (no grumbling allowed). Not when everyone is perfect, but when everyone brings themselves, warts and all, together.

When that happens, there is joy. Not perfection, but joy. And we need to focus on the joy, not the perfection.

Because let's be honest, we are human. We make mistakes, we are hampered by circumstance, we are self-righteous, we are scared – and all of these things can separate us from one another. Jesus knew this, and it's why he said: *Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*

This is why repentance and reconciliation are two of the central acts we are called into as Christians. They are the work of nothing less than our whole selves. There is no magic 'one and done button' we can press – we must enter into repentance and reconciliation again and again throughout our entire lives.

We do this every time we make corporate confession together in worship on Sundays. Having the space and place to open our hearts to God together is essential – it's why we pause in silence before beginning the prayer of Confession, to breath deep and call to mind the burdens we need to release.

There is also the Rite of Reconciliation, where we can gather one on one with a priest to repent and seek absolution.

But even more than corporate and personal confession, repentance and reconciliation are two of the most fundamentally important aspects of how we live in community.

Healthy communities are places where we apologize when we hurt one another or break our norms. We ask for forgiveness, knowing it may take time to reestablish trust and mend broken relationships, but holding on to the hope of restoration. We are human, and repentance and reconciliation are complicated for us. Jesus knew this too.

But with God, forgiveness is **always there**, is **always** being extended – and this is what Jesus modeled for us and our communities.

What Jesus was offering to everyone gathered around him was the gift and grace of a community in which radical welcome was practiced, where everyone could **hear** the Word of God, where the fullness of God was known through unity created from diversity.

This is what we have to come back to when we have conflict, so that we don't fall into the trap of desiring to be right more than being made whole.

We can be right all by ourselves or with those who are like us, but we will never be whole – that true reflection of God – until we come together across difference, like say the difference between tax collectors and Pharisees, or perhaps even Republican and Democrat...

Community isn't about perfection, but it is about authenticity. It's about sharing our stories, listening to each other, and saying sorry when we need to, and showing up for one another.

I think that's something we do here at St. James' – and that's because we pray together, we confess together, we feast together – and we are joyful together. We understand that we all are lost and found, and we believe in grace and mercy.

Friends, it is a gift to be a community where the reconciling love of God is made known to all. Let us continue to shine our light like a beacon on a hill, sharing the good news and inviting and welcoming seekers of every kind into our midst – that the angels of God may continue to rejoice.

~ Amen ~