

**Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C), September 16, 2007****Readings: Ex. 32:7-11; 13-14; Ps. 51; 1 Tim. 1:12-17; Lk. 15:1-10****“Amazing Grace”**

The power of Jesus’s parables lie in the way they crack open our ordinary ways of thinking and invite us to see the world in entirely new ways. On one level, the two parables in today’s gospel seem to be about repentance. Each parable ends by telling us that there is great joy in heaven over “one sinner who repents.” So these parables contain a call each of us to take action—to turn away from sinful acts, to return to the right path of living and to God. But parables are stories that always have a lot more depth than a simple moral message. If Jesus wanted to call his hearers not to sin and to follow the moral path he could just repeat the Ten Commandments. But the two parables in the gospel are not simple moral instruction calling people to turn from bad behavior to greater righteousness.

The key to the meaning of the parables is in the setting in which Jesus presents them. Jesus told these two parables in response to the Scribes and Pharisees who criticized him for spending time among and eating with tax collectors and sinners. Tax collectors were scorned because they collected taxes for the Roman Empire. They were collaborators with the imperial power that ruled over Israel. It was commonly suspected that they charged more than they should and kept the difference. We know too how Jesus interacted with prostitutes and even welcomed them to share meals at his table.

The Scribes and Pharisees considered themselves to be very holy. So it is not surprising that they were shocked by Jesus associating with religious and social outsiders, to the apparent neglect of those who are moral and righteous. It is not hard to hear the self-righteous anger in their voices when they say: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Jesus' parables respond to their self-righteousness. To see this, let's focus on the lost coin story.

This parable tells us of a woman who had ten silver coins. In Greek, the coins are drachma—about what a poor peasant could earn in one day. When the poor woman loses one of them, she has lost at least a day's meals for her family. So it is not surprising that she searches and searches to find the coin. She is really happy when she does find it, so she invites her friends to a party, saying "Rejoice with me." The party may have cost as much as the lost coin was worth.

Jesus is telling the resentful Scribes and Pharisees that God deals with lost sinners the way this woman deals with her lost coin. These righteous religious authorities think Jesus should stay away from the tax collectors and prostitutes. He should correct them, sternly demand they change their ways, and under no circumstances share bread and wine with them at the dinner table. Don't get close to people like that! You could be contaminated by them! But Jesus sees matters very differently. The tax collectors and prostitutes may be sinners, but that is the reason to seek them out, to be with them, and let them see how good God really is.

Repentance, in other words, is much more a matter of being found by a searching God than of anything we do. God is like the woman in the parable. Just as she seeks for the coin till she finds it, so God searches for all of us wayward souls till we are found and then welcomes us back with a party. God's response to sinners is forgiveness and welcome, not judgment and exclusion. What an amazing message about amazing grace! We don't earn God's friendship by being good or righteous. God's friendship is offered even to us sinners. Just as Jesus regularly associated with tax collectors and prostitutes, God wants to welcome all sinners into his household and will keep searching for all of them until he finds them.

This of course, is very fortunate, for we know we are far from perfect and have quite a few nasty and sinful aspects to our personalities. We might even be more ready to admit this when we see that God is like the woman in the parable, searching for us despite our imperfections. We don't have to pretend we are perfect when we see that God wants to welcome us to the party despite our sins. Jesus offers us the joy of being discovered by a searching God, a God who wants to forgive and welcome us to the celebration. This is good news indeed. Let's give thanks this morning for this amazing grace as we joyfully share at the table Jesus has set for us sinners.