

“Here’s to the Day!”¹

September 15, 2013

I

W.H. Auden says in one of his long poems, “no one is taken in, at least not all of the time; In our bath, or the subway, or the middle of the night, We know very well we are not unlucky ... but evil.”

Now that may be putting it a bit strongly, but here we are. I mean, you look in the mirror...and you know ... like sheep ... we have all gone astray. So let’s talk a bit about the Gospel passage this morning ... about sheep and coins and such ... and see where that takes us.

II

See, Luke’s Chapter 15 is sometimes called “the Gospel within the Gospel” – and its basic meaning is just good news all the way around. The parables here and the one following about the homecoming for the Prodigal Son are all about God’s generous mercy.

But this morning’s passage begins with Jesus dining with strays of all kinds. Now there’s a Near Eastern proverb that goes, “I saw them eating and I know who they are.” Meaning I saw them eating together, and that told me all I needed to know about who they are ... by who they hang out with, who they break bread with.

Well, Jesus shared bread with the “wicked,” and apparently ... just about everyone else, too. And so he’s criticized here in today’s passage for consorting with tax collectors and such.

But you know, I don’t think “tax collectors and sinners” quite does it for you and me does it. So what’s the scene mean? Who were these “wicked” who Jesus welcomed at table? Who were these folks who so shocked the bystanders?

Well, it seems that these tax collectors were absolute traitors to their own kind, vermin who sucked out the very lifeblood of their own people. And “sinners’ weren’t those who simply chose to commit “inappropriate acts” in private, but were notorious scandals, absolute outcasts from the community ... like, for example, apparently New York’s Anthony Weiner has become.

I mean, Jesus dined with downright untouchables!

And again, to eat with someone – then ... and now, by the way – to eat with someone means a certain equality, an embrace ... “I saw them eating and I know who they are.” And so Jesus shared his table, creating a bond with the Anthony Weiners of his day. And so the good folks shout, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with ‘em!”

But then Jesus looks ‘em square in the eye, and tells ‘em two stories ... one about a shepherd ... hot in pursuit of the one gone astray ... searching, searching ‘til it’s found. And one about a housewife who drops all her other chores, sweeping her heart out ‘til she finds the coin that was lost.

But now I think there are two things interesting here about these stories if you think about ‘em for a minute.

First, I think one interesting thing here is that sheep and coins don’t repent. I mean, they don’t come to their senses – like that Prodigal son does in the next episode – sheep and coins don’t first come to their senses and turn around and make a new start on their own – although don’t get me wrong, there’s plenty about repentance in other parts of scripture.

But I think maybe Jesus is really saying here that we sheep – that coin that slipped away – that you and I are first sought ... chased ... hounded ... chased and loved by God into repentance! ... after returning to the fold.

O.K. But let’s look a little further here and see what else comes to light ... my second interesting thing about this passage. And I’m just going to now talk about the sheep story ‘cause I think Jesus’ point is the same for both.

Now. In addition to focusing on individual sheep and the joy in heaven when one is found ... I think maybe the shepherd goes after the lost sheep not only to save him or her, but maybe more importantly – maybe to save the other ninety-nine. I mean, since we’re communal animals from our genes on up, and we’re all in this together ... maybe the other ninety-nine sheep cannot finally achieve wholeness apart from that hundredth one.

So maybe the main point of this passage is that finally there’s no individual salvation, no final wholeness ‘til all are saved. See, maybe this is God’s wisdom, maybe this is God’s way. And so maybe Jesus is being sort-of political about salvation here ... which embraces all of us, all of us ... for any of us to be truly finally free and whole.

So my point. Just maybe your salvation, mine ... your wholeness ... depends on the lost being found, depends on the homeless being welcomed. And then that Shepherd ... that Sweeper in search of the lost coin ... then God rejoices.

III

Milton Brasher-Cunningham is a chef, a writer, a minister – as well as musician – who lives in Durham, North Carolina. And he’s written a book titled Keeping the Feast which I’ve just

finished. It's witty and homey, and has some great recipes in it if you're so inclined. Anyway, Milton – I'll call him by his first name since his last is hyphenated and so longish to say – Milton also has a blog called [www."don't eat alone"](http://www.donteatalone.com) – which pretty much sums up his message throughout the book.

See, Milton sees eating together in communion – sharing bread and wine together – as a metaphor for God's inclusive Kingdom, as a foretaste of Kingdom come. But like Jesus, he also makes the case that you and I can also experience that coming Kingdom when we embrace each other around the dinner table, when we cook for each other, when we raise a toast to the Life God has blessed us with.

In one chapter, Milton remembers how he and a seminary friend named Ken were writing songs in the late 1980's that were then recorded on an album. He writes, "as we shaped that album, one of the subjects on our short list was a song about Communion." He says, "In one late night talk, Ken told me about one communion with his students."

He says, "As I remember, they were reading the account of the Last Supper where Jesus poured the wine and then said, 'I will not drink this cup again until I drink it new with you in the Kingdom.' And then Milton says, "as Ken finished reading, one of his students raised her glass and said, 'Here's to the Day.' And the rest of the group returned the toast and then they all drank together."

Milton says, "As he told me the story, I wrote down her words, and they became the title of our song." He says, "Though we do remember Jesus' death in the meal," but you know ... it's not a wake ... 'cause there's more to the meal than the betrayal that must have marked that night in the Upper Room. He says, "This side of the Resurrection, our deep memory also calls us to profound hope as we remember why we are eating and why we are drinking together, and Who we are waiting to join us once again. So we dream out loud of a better world to come."

He says, "I could see Ken's students in my mind's eye as I wrote the song's lyrics. They include the following lines:

"Pieces of life laid on the table
Here is the blood poured out in love.
Fill this cup, raise it up
Here's to the day, my friend ...
Fill this cup, raise it up
Here's to the day that's coming."

Anyway, Milton wrote that song before the Berlin Wall had come down, and while Nelson Mandela was still in prison, when eastern Europe was still controlled by the Soviets. So that song, titled "Day that was Coming," was not just about Jesus' words, but about bringing hope to those on the edge who still suffer now.

'Course in our own time, that includes the Syrians on all sides of that sad land, the Egyptians who suffer, who march for justice and freedom, the Sudanese who starve to death on the wrong side of history, the poor in our own neighborhood, that guy on the corner of Patterson and Three Chopt, beggin' for a dime.

Milton's next verse went:

"Can you say it for the ones whose voices are silenced?
Can you say it for the ones who've never been free?
Can you fill this cup, raise it up –
Here's to the day that's promised,
God ... speed that day ..."

Writing the last verse, Milton says he was thinking of Mandela and Tutu and Martin Luther King Jr., thinking of the students with their glasses held high. He writes, "I was thinking about how much I believed in what I was writing, trying ... trying to say something big about communion.

And then, he says, "the last verse just poured out of me:

"Gather in close now, cling to each other
Sing to the night, you don't sing alone
Fill this cup, raise it up
Here's to the day – remember!"

See finally, this morning's scene with Jesus is not so much about you and me being found, by God, over and over again – although it is that. But basically it's about our joining God in rounding up God's herd, recovering every one of God's treasures. It's about questioning ... questioning the idea that there are certain ... conditions that the lost must meet before they're eligible to be found, questioning ... that there are certain qualities they must exhibit before we'll seek them out.

No, it's about discovering the joy of finding. ... that all are loved, even in their lostness. That all are precious, every one of us. Every city is precious. The whole world is precious. That the

Kingdom of God is at hand. That we all can share the feast ... and with each morsel and sip ... marking a new day with the gifts of God for the people of God.

“I saw them eating and I know who they are!”

God help us!! Here’s...to the day!

Amen.

1. Resources used: *Synthesis* for Year C September 15, 2013; Barbara Brown Taylor’s *The Preaching Life*, “The Lost and Found Department”; Milton Brasher-Cunningham’s *Keeping the Feast*