

Joy over a 'repentant sinner.' That's often the takeaway lesson here. In the past I've talked about how nice it must be to be the one that is so eagerly sought – or what it feels like to be among the 99 left behind' while the shepherd goes out after the wanderer. All of these conversations are valid – and each perspective brings new meaning to the text. But if we are supposed to live our lives by Jesus' principles, it is hard to find one in this corner of Luke's gospel on which we can hang our hats.

Repentance – right we get it – it's good to be able to examine our actions and resolve to 'do better,' but that does not seem to be the point of these parables.

No editorial is offered on the mistakes – no talk of checking pockets for holes, or building a better sheep pen. The missing things are accounted for, and that means a celebration. "Rejoice with ME" say the shepherd and the woman – share in the joy of reunion with me. If the good news is that the lost are ultimately found – and that is a cause for rejoicing - what (if anything) is Jesus telling us about loss?

I ask because loss has been much on our minds this week, with the death by senseless violence of so many in James Smith Cree Nation and Weldon Saskatchewan, and compounded by the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. But even before these major moments of grief, we have had plenty of conversation about loss.

Sometimes, loss is irreversible. Death – even allowing for the hope of a heavenly reunion – is a life changing, relationship altering loss from which recovery is difficult for those whose lives continue. But loss is always redeemable according to Jesus – and that redemption comes with relationship.

"This fellow WELCOMES sinners and eats with them..." The attitude expressed by the pharisees and scribes in the gospel reading is evidence of a dangerous attitude. Clearly Jesus has 'crossed a line.' Those whom he welcomes are not typically welcome at respectable tables – in places where 'important people gather. The implication is that these 'lost' are better left lost; that Jesus seems to have found a different crowd to eat and drink with is NOT cause for celebration. These are the social misfits – effectively 'dead' to polite society – because there is a price to be paid for failing to meet the standard of those who 'set the rules.'

We may find this a harsh assessment – and none of us wish to be lumped with the scribes and pharisees – but the truth is we are still making those distinctions. 'Those people' are all around us – hanging around downtown – sleeping in the park – asking for food and favours at the door – howling in their misery and bewildered by substance abuse, poverty, grief and mental illness. They too mourn the loss of something: employment, dignity, independence, economic stability, good health, housing...the list is long for them – but the most telling loss is the loss of real relationship. We turn them aside – shame them into the shadows of our communities, families and all. And Jesus would welcome them – eat with them – laugh, mourn, and hope with them.

Want to talk about losing and finding now?

We mourn the loss of two (or three) generations of church-connected folk. Family and friends, neighbours and those who used to be 'ours.' Some have moved, or moved on. Some have lost interest or lost touch. Some have been wounded – others left frustrated; their expectations unmet. And yet, the lost are all around us, daring us to follow Jesus. And Jesus' parable implies that we should put aside our other satisfactions, stop what we're doing and mend those relationships. Find what's been lost – welcome the 'sinners' – celebrate their existence.

Sheep and coins are all well and good, but the real argument on that day – an argument pursued by 'good, public-minded people' – was about people whom the scribes and pharisees describe only as 'sinners.' People who look, act and are different; people whose behaviour can be alarming; people whose presence is a reminder that not all problems are easily solved.

Repentance requires relationship, and Jesus opened the door to relationship to folks who were, in his day, left to figure it out for themselves. Calls for self-improvement – talk that suggests 'there's plenty of help for those who want it' – these are empty gestures on the part of polite society. The way to access that help is often mired in paperwork, or bedevilled by changing regulations. The most effective path to 'self-improvement' involves having company on the journey.

Jesus modelled that throughout the gospels, and invites us to take up the cause.

We mourn the loss of members and status and purpose and all the things that we think make the church the church. But the lost are all around us – shunned and socially awkward – daring us to notice them. Daring us to do better by them. We say their behaviour is a problem, but what if our behaviour could help solve the problem?

Jesus made much of the shepherd who left the many to return the one – and the woman who stopped everything to rediscover a single coin.

What might Jesus be asking of us?