Pentecost 17: 11 September Luke 15:1-10

A prize for a connection with this image and the passage.

Luke 15:1-2 speaks of Jesus ‘welcoming’ or ‘receiving’ sinners and dining with them. Jesus appears to be the host. So whether as guest or as host, Jesus keeps bad company (see also Mark 2:13-17; Luke 7:31-35). Nothing in the Law forbids such company, but it is sound advice to avoid such company, as already Psalm 1 declares: Blessed is the person who does not keep company with the ungodly.

Jesus has a choice when accused of mixing with sinners. Although a third choice was that he could just stay away.

**Justify his actions and explain that he is helping sinners repent**

**Explain that he values these people even thought they are sinners, maybe enabling transformation**

Meals were significant symbols of togetherness, especially meals beyond the immediate family circle. Food was precious. Hosting a meal for a number of people cost something in a time of scarce resources. It is difficult for modern people in wealthy societies to appreciate the value of such occasions. In the ancient world people took these larger community meals very seriously. They became the occasion for entertainment but also for education. They could be rip-roaring parties, scenes of debauchery and abuse. They could be just good fun and occasions for laughter and conversation. The word, ‘symposium’, survives in our language as a term for a seminar or colloquium. It was often the word used for such feasts. Its etymology reflects these origins: ‘together-drinking’.

The broader social context explains some of the features of Jesus’ meals. You need some money to mount such occasions. Tax collectors or toll collectors (as Levi clearly was, on the Bethsaida/Capernaum border) had money. ‘Sinners’ are unspecified. They are most likely to be characters who kept company together and were engaged in activities widely recognised as wrong or immoral. Quite probably among these would be prostitutes, because sexual favours were commodities bought and sold at such occasions and formed part of the entertainment. Even though we are not to suppose that the lewd scenes painted on many vases and bowls of the period were snapshots of what went on in Palestine, the fact that in similar occasions in the gospels women do appear equipped to dance or anoint suggests that we should imagine them to be among those labelled ‘sinners’. Jesus links prostitutes with toll collectors in Matt 21:32.

*For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the* **tax collectors and the prostitutes did***. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him*

**All this makes it reasonable that most religious leaders would frown at Jesus’ behaviour.** They may also have had concerns about whether procedures for **tithing food** has been observed and whether some **unclean** or contaminated foods might have slipped onto the menu, but we hear nothing of that. That had to wait for when the church found itself in the Gentile world.

Luke makes it sound like Jesus is only there to win souls to repentance. That saves Jesus’ respectability. **One could almost imagine him in spiritual uniform, clad in heavy armour against the contamination, handing out tracts. This is not the way the gospels portray it. Rather he is there with them showing acceptance,** and, as Luke suggests in 15:1-2, even prepared to host them. Luke is right: Jesus offered a vision which called for total change. A positive response to Jesus meant joining him in a dangerous endeavour which would be life transforming. But the focus is people, not particular acts of repentance. Too often Luke’s stories here are read as portraying the delight of angels when people stop doing bad things.

We are more likely to get to the heart of the matter if we let the parables speak for themselves without what many acknowledge as Luke’s interpretative ‘helps’ in 15:7 and 10. A farmer goes out looking for a lost sheep. The farmer values the lost sheep. This could simply be a matter of profit and loss. Sheep are his business and to lose one sheep is to lose capital. In fact Jesus quite regularly uses illustrations from the commercial world in all its ambiguity. But he has not invented the image. Most hearers would put another value on the story**. Both in Israel and in surrounding cultures the image of a shepherd had been used to speak of caring, mostly as the ruler’s responsibility towards the citizens. Caring is the focus.** That will be part of the focus here.

**There is something more than getting people to repent. Much more fundamental is valuing them as persons**. This makes sense of the fact that **Jesus actually enters into close relations with tax collectors and sinners by dining with them**. He takes them **seriously as people**. He values them as persons and meets them in their terms. He is not prepared to write them off, as his critics did, or to say, as they would have: we will value you and welcome only if you repent. Until then we are staying away or if we come near you it will only be to preach to you to change. Luke’s ‘helps’ almost take us back to that approach.

The ”tea bag”

The second story is without doubt about money. God is like a woman (worth noting in itself) who does not want to lose even one drachma. God celebrates love and restored relationships. That includes change, but it is bigger than that, because the focus is not on getting a kick out of success, but **on satisfied seeking. God is the seeking and yearning one who comes offering a restored relationship.**

The **next story**, not in today’s reading, the famous parable about the wayward son, makes a special point of emphasising the father’s delight in love which makes him break all the rules of male, fatherly dignity, and has him run down the road like a child to throw his arms around his returning son, and that even before he has any idea of repentance.

Was it self-defence on Jesus’ part to protect him against the Pharisees’ taunts?

Was Jesus calling the sinners to repent? he would have been the hero of those Pharisees. I think it’s more than both of these.. It makes sense to see all three parables as stories of self defence on the part of Jesus. Luke suggests as much by the way he introduces them in 15:1-2. The controversy is not over whether Jesus called sinners to repent. If that was all Jesus was doing as well as taking his soapbox into the arena of sinners, then he would have been the hero of those Pharisees. Rather **the issue was that he already demonstrated a willingness to value them as persons and enter relations with them as people of worth before there was any repentance. This was an expression of love. The love was unconditional. But it was also very challenging, because he was also inviting them as valued people to become part of the future vision.**

**He was not doing so in order to make them valued and worthy of love, but because they were valued and loved.**

**The distinction is subtle but significant.** **Both ways involve repentance in its best sense, but one way puts the focus on the deeds and the laws, and the other puts the focus on the person and possibility of transformation. One tends to focus on the fruit; the other, on the tree, itself. There is all the difference in the world between telling the tree it must produce good fruit and tending to its real needs which make such fruit bearing possible.**

**Tony Campolo** [**story**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRBM_YY_YX0) **maybe. Agnes turns 39**

**Always good to end with a real world challenge. I think we understand Jesus through the Pharasee’s challenge and Jesus’ answer in the two parables. But how does it help us understand us.**

**What do our social gatherings look like?**

**How much to de we welcome people who aren’t like us?**

**Who are we celebrating with? Who do we share the joy of creation with?**

**Who do we share the news that God is searching for us all?**