North Kildonan United Church

11th September 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

I Timothy 1: 12-17 *Luke 15: 1-10*

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

If Jesus was running for election, say for Mayor of Winnipeg, since so many others are running for the position this season, and we were on his campaign, what might we come up with as a catchy slogan? In a sound bite, what might sum up the mission of this man from Galilee? Something that both captures his Jesus message but is brief enough to fit on a bumper sticker or a business card or an election poster?

How about we use what his opponents say about him. How's this for a slogan? "Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Now his political opponents, the Pharisees and Scribes party, threw this slogan out as an insult, as a way to put down who Jesus is and what his mission, his platform, his work is all about. And in the process, they say as much about themselves as they do about Jesus. They are the ritually clean, the externally pure, the masters of the law, and they have perfectly divided up the world into saved and damned, clean and unclean, first and second class, or first class and no class. They know how people should behave, how the genders should interact and not interact, and they know who they want to avoid. They know who the undesirables are. If some day it should happen that a victim must be found, they have a little list…

And their kind are not restricted to the first century. Back in the pre-pandemic days, my brother's partner was flying out of Ottawa. She was seated beside an Orthodox Jewish man. Once the plane was in the air and the seatbelt sign was off, he called a flight attendant and demanded that Francine be moved somewhere else. He was not going to have a woman whom he did not know sit beside him. But that wasn't the real reason. He wanted her moved because his interpretation of Jewish law was that a woman like Francine might be menstruating and that would make him unclean. Did I mention that Francine was 70 years old at the time?

A woman in the row behind them received the same treatment from another Orthodox Jewish man. Eventually seats were switched, though Francine and the other woman were humiliated by these pompous, outwardly pious men.

"Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them." Jesus who breaks down the barriers of male and female, straight and gay, faith and unbelief, Jesus who taught that what is

found in our heart, not our external religious practices, that is what truly matters.

To deal with his political and religious opponents, the Pharisee and Scribes party if you will, Jesus tells two parables about the lost and the found. And of course, he uses these parables because to his opponents, the lost are clearly sinners, clearly those who by their wickedness and rejection of the law have no place in either polite society or Temple worship.

Jesus came to break open the barriers between God and humanity, to present the Good News of God's love so that all might embrace new life, new promise, new hope. The lost come in many forms, and perhaps one of the main purposes of the church is to provide a place where the lost can feel they are found, where their life can find new meaning and God's love can reach deep within them.

In London, England, and perhaps other British cities, people in dire straits can raise some money for themselves by selling The Big Issue.

As their website says: "Our mission is to dismantle poverty by creating opportunity, through self-help, social trading and business solutions. Vendors buy The Big Issue magazine for £1.25 and sell it for £2.50, meaning each seller is a micro-entrepreneur who is working, not begging. Therefore, it is vitally important that buyers take their copy of the magazine when they pay for it."

In one edition, a feature writer in The Big Issue wrote of wandering into a chapel when a group of strangers came in to have a service. The language is a bit rough, just a warning. The article begins:

"They were a pretty retro looking bunch…and they were followed by a priest who proceeded to hand out prayer books…I've never been a great fan of established religion and have generally assumed that ardent practitioners are deluded, happy-clappy saddoes who make friends with God because they're too inept to do so with anyone on earth.

There was more than adequate material for a really biting satire. But there was one problem: I was deeply moved by the whole experience. No one was more surprised than I, and no one more determined not to be moved. I simply couldn't help it. There was a point in the service when everyone turned round to everyone else, shook hands, embraced, and said 'Peace be to you.' It was brilliant. Uplifting.

No doubt you'll be thinking, 'What a jerk.' I'm in complete agreement. Yet I can't escape the fact that that service was one of the most spiritually liberating experiences I've ever had. It wasn't because of the words or the actions or the dogma. It certainly wasn't because of the free wine, which was gruesome. It was, I think, because of the underlying assumption of community. The sense that in this fragmented society of ours, where the spiritual is perpetually sidelined in favour of the material: where loving thy neighbour is something you do when your neighbour's husband is out at work, that it's OK to be, well, soulful.

I found to my eternal embarrassment that tears were pouring down my face. I had the sensation of being a child again. Where once I sniggered at the faithful, I now have a sneaking suspicion they might know more than I do."

Jesus tells two parables today, parables of a lost sheep and a lost coin. And the temptation with reading these parables is to focus on the sheep and the coin. Let's resist that temptation and instead think for a moment of what Jesus is saying about God. What if Jesus is saying God is like an ecstatic shepherd when one of the sheep, one of God's people changes direction and comes back to the way of life. What if God is like a woman who loses a coin, finds it, and is so delighted that she hosts an extravagant party, probably spending more than the coin is worth on refreshments for her friends and family.

In the gospel account, the sheep has wandered off and the coin has been lost-the owners search and search, at great personal cost, until the lost is recovered. Does this challenge an understanding of God as an aloof, indifferent Creator, challenge a conviction that if God does exist God doesn't care? The picture Jesus paints couldn't be more different-in our reading God's love is extravagant, reckless, relentless and there is joy-joy in heaven when one of God's creatures comes to their senses and is back on the right path. Joy when the lost are found, joy when we open ourselves to the riches of God's grace and love.

Occasionally when I am driving from home to the church, I will pass a man on Portage Avenue with one of those old-fashioned sinner repent signs. There is too much text to read, though it seems like the familiar 'wages of sin is death' is within the wording. As I see him, standing on the dividing pavement near Carlton or Hargrave, with his angry sign of condemnation, I wonder what Jesus would think of it. Might Jesus just come up to him, put his arm around him and say something like, "friend, if you really want to serve me, come help in the kitchen at an outreach ministry or volunteer to do some building maintenance for a day care centre, or drive patients to their cancer care appointments. If you love me, share that love with others."

I have often found that the lyrics of hymns convey a deeper meaning than words I might have chosen. This is especially true with the wonderful hymn "*A Woman and a Coin - The Coin is Lost"* written in 1990 by the late Lutheran minister Jaroslav Vajda. This hymn is found in Voices United, and I believe these verses are worth hearing and worth contemplating. They are also worth singing if the tune was a bit simpler.

A woman and a coin - the coin is lost!
How much it means to her, what time and toil,
what part it was to play in her bright dreams!
Am I that treasured coin worth searching for?
I'm found, and you rejoice!
What love! What love!

A shepherd and a sheep - the sheep is lost!
Far from the flock, the one in hundred cries,
then, risking life, the shepherd's voice and staff!
Am I that treasured sheep worth dying for?
I live, and you rejoice!
What love! What love!

Dear God, you sought us when the world was lost,
you gave your only son at what a cost;
your spirit welcomes home the tempest-tossed:
now we can be all you were dreaming of.
We're safe, and you rejoice!
What love! What love!

In our gospel Jesus likens God to a reckless shepherd and a diligent woman. May we find comfort in trusting in such a passionate, generous God, who never stops loving us, never stops searching for us and who never lets us go. Amen.