

OK, here's my nod to grandparents day. WHAT IS A GRANDMOTHER? A grandmother is a lady who had no children of her own. She likes other girls and boys. A GRANDFATHER is a man grandmother. He goes for walks with boys and they talk about fishing and stuff like that.

Grandmothers don't have to do anything except be there. They are so old they shouldn't play hard or run. It's enough if they drive to the store and buy us ice cream and candy. Or, if they take us for walks, they should slow down past things like leaves and caterpillars. They should never say 'hurry up.'

Grandmothers are usually fat but not too fat to tie your shoe. They wear glasses and funny underwear. They can take their teeth and gums off! Grandmothers don't have to be smart, only answer questions like "Why isn't God married?" – and "Why do dogs chase cats?"

Everybody should try to have a grandmother especially if you don't have a TV, because they are the only ones among the grownups who have time.

First, some gospel background on this, one of the richest texts in all of scripture. Luke is a Master storyteller and he alone records these 3 parables of Jesus about the lost sheep, lost coin and the lost sons. It's quite a contrast from last Sunday as Jesus spoke about the disruptive, high cost of discipleship. Though a large crowd was clambering after Him, Jesus set an extremely high bar for those who wish to follow Him, telling everyone that the cross is part of the expected experience for His followers. We can't ever say we weren't warned.

And yet, this Sunday, almost in contrast, Jesus tells 3 parables that speak of God's reign as a relentless divine seeking of the lost. Now the first 2 verses of the chapter set the context. Jesus is being slammed by His critics for not only receiving but also partying with those whom the respectable, knowledgeable, church-going folk consider to be irretrievably lost, beyond the bounds of God's redemption. "This man welcomes sinners – and eats with them."

But it is consistent with the picture of Jesus Luke has been painting since chapter 1. Jesus cares for – and welcomes – everyone who He meets – but He seems to have a specially soft spot in His heart for those who have screwed up, lost their way, or been marginalized by others. Jesus has compassion for the bent-over woman in the synagogue on the Sabbath (13:10-17), starts trouble at the home of a Pharisee in a determined attempt to reach and teach even His critics when He hadn't been invited as a teacher but simply as a guest (14:7-14), told of the Great Banquet, in which the outsider-- "poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind" replace the anticipated, insider guest list (14:15-24). Luke's Gospel is intent to portray Jesus as the savior who saves sinners, even as the presumed righteous criticize Him for doing so. Luke relates the call of Levi and the debate concerning Jesus' table fellowship with the tax collectors and sinners (5:27-32). Luke alone provides the story of the sinful woman who anoints Jesus' feet with her tears (7:36-50). Then there's the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:9-14), as well as the scandalous event, just before He comes to His cross, in which Jesus invites Himself to the home of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector (19:1-10). And at the end, even on the cross, Jesus prays for forgiveness for His executioners (23:34), and blesses a thief (23:43), telling him 'This day you will be with me in paradise.' And Jesus' critics sneer at Him throughout the gospel.

What is even stranger is that though Jesus says He is seeking sinners in order that they might turn and repent (5:32), Jesus never criticizes or corrects these lost sinners. He eats with them and is criticized for doing

so (5:27-32; 7:36-50; 15:1-32; 19:1-10) It seems that He must think that the experience of eating with Him alone will change their hearts. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, July-Sept 2022, p. 33-34)

OK, so what? This gospel with these 3 parables is as relevant today as it was the day Jesus preached it. Our passage says Jesus tolerated sinners. No, I said that wrong. Jesus confronted them with their sin. Nope, that's wrong too. Actually, the passage says Jesus WELCOMED sinners – and ate with them. And this offended the religious leaders. Think of the current debate on giving communion to politicians who are pro-abortion. Jesus welcomed sinners – and ate with them. Typically, when Jesus wants to get an important point across, He usually tells 1, maybe 2 stories. Luke 15 has 3 stories all on the same theme: God loves us unconditionally. No exceptions.

It's easy to read the Bible and feel smug and self-righteous. We all think we're on Jesus side, don't we? But what kind of people offend us? Who do we tolerate, but find it difficult to welcome? Who would we resist inviting to dinner – or to Mass?

As Pope Francis has reminded us, the church is supposed to be a hospital for broken souls, not a museum for perfect saints. It is supposed to be a lighthouse, shining in the darkness, welcoming people who are lost. It is supposed to be a place where people find open arms, open hearts, and open doors; the church is not a safe to be cracked or a castle to be stormed. It's amazing and tragic that though sinners felt so drawn to Jesus some of them have so much difficulty feeling drawn to His Church. Why is this? Probably because we have turned so much of our attention to the nurture and care of those on the 'inside' that we have lost our focus and passion for those on the 'outside.' Or it could be that a world of prodigal sons and daughters have experienced in us the judgmental scowl of the angry older brother.

Third, these parables reveal the truth that Jesus taught us about God – God is the great Seeker. God is full of grief when even one of His children is lost, and He is willing to turn the world upside down to turn that person right-side up. And when the lost person is found, oh the great joy of God's heart! The party of joy that God throws is absolutely scandalous, for the guests of honor are such a mess. How do we deal with such scandalous and amazing grace? By remembering that every one of us, every first and last one of us, is equally forgiven, equally welcomed by God, and equally undeserving of His favor and mercy. Our final song today has it right: Amazing grace that saved a WRETCH like me. Compared to the pure heart of God, we are all wretches, pretty dark. But there is plenty of love in God's heart to go around for us all. Thank God for that!

We hear a lot these days about 'seeker churches.' And let's be honest -- they are kicking our donkeys by bringing people back into relationship with God. (you know what perfectly good biblical word I want to use, but some of you might be offended unless I remind you that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on an ass and that's the word I wanted) But the deep truth is that God is the one who does the seeking. Before anyone thinks about God, God has first been thinking about them. Before any of us seeks, or finds God, it is God who has been seeking to find us. And this is the best news of all. For if this game of spiritual hide-and-seek was all up to us, many of us would never find God at all.

Fortunately, even though we are often the scowling, pouting older brother when people are trying to find their way back to church, the grace of God is first seen in the fact that while we were still clueless about God, He was already seeking us with a desperate love, leaving clues to help lead us back to Him, clearing the way for our eventual return home. And so, the apostle Paul did not rejoice that he had finally found God. Rather, he rejoiced that even though he was the chief of all sinners, God sought and found him. Likewise, this is the point of the parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin and the lost sons. It was the shepherd who sought and found and rescued the sheep that went astray. It was the woman who swept the house in search

of the missing coin. And it was the father who was scanning the horizon looking for his son who embraced him and welcomed him back with a party – and pleaded with the self-righteous older brother to join in the feast, featuring veal scaloppini, veal chops and veal marsala! God is the great seeker after humans. As Jesus said of His own ministry which is supposed to be ours: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Lk 19:10).

If anyone of us today is feeling kind of lost, God has a great word for us. And here is what God says, “Ready or not, here I come.” It’s time to be found – and help others to do the same. Amen (last section adapted from GRACEWORKS, Sept 11, 2022, p. 4)

FOR PERSONAL USE ONLY