

## Good News for Shady Characters

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Luke 15:1-10

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I have an acquaintance whom I've not seen in probably twenty years, but I read a lot about him back during the spring. You probably did too. His name is Sid Burgess. He is a retired Presbyterian pastor from Homewood, and he became lost while hiking in the Bankhead National Forest. Local media covered it extensively.

It was a pretty Saturday in April. An avid hiker, Sid set out for a day hike at the Randolph Trailhead in Bankhead. He had a little food and a little water. That was all he needed. Besides, it was just a day hike.

When he did not return home that evening, Sid's wife notified authorities. A search began early on Sunday, and they found his vehicle but not Sid. The search resumed on Monday until it was suspended because of severe weather. On Tuesday morning, hundreds of volunteers gathered for the search, knowing that time was running out. Just after lunch one of the volunteers found Sid sitting beside a White Creek Falls in Winston County. The sheriff reported the five words everyone was hoping to hear, "He is alive and well."

Later that day Sid's wife, Kay, put this post on Facebook:

*Thank you for your prayers. Sid Burgess was found today sitting by a creek where he had been drinking (creek water) and eating the small amount of food he had brought with him. Being too weak to walk out, he was air lifted out. His diagnoses (sic) is not presently known, but I will let you know when I hear. ISN'T GOD GREAT??? Thank you, Lord, for watching over him.*

We can all imagine the rejoicing that took place that Tuesday evening with Sid, his family, and friends. One who was lost was found, and that is always a cause for rejoicing.

That is the message of the two parables I read earlier. The first parable is about a lost sheep. Its twin is about a lost coin. The lectionary does not include the third parable in Luke 15, but it is about a lost son, actually two lost sons. That which is lost in the parable is found, and the entire community rejoices. But notice where else rejoicing occurs. "I tell you," Jesus said, "there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

Let me introduce you to the main characters in this narrative. Let's begin with the Pharisees and scribes, whose murmuring against Jesus prompted the telling of the two stories. The Pharisees were a deeply religious and respected order of men who devoted their lives to God. We often speak critically of the Pharisees today because of their legalism, but they were highly regarded in their day. They studied the Hebrew scriptures and maintained purity in all matters. Because of their concern for purity, they lived separate from the impure population. Eating a meal with impure folks? Not an option. Pharisees ate meals only with those who, like them, observed the laws of purity.

The next group is the scribes. The New International Version refers to them as "the teachers of the law." That's who they were. Since they had extensive knowledge of the Law of Moses, they actually carried dual roles. While they were religious figures, they also functioned like a lawyer in our day, drafting legal documents for marriages, divorces, sales of land, etc.

Here's what happened. Luke says the Pharisees and scribes saw tax collectors and sinner gathering around Jesus to listen to his teachings. Apparently they also saw Jesus eating with these impure people. This did not match their definition of a "religious person." So Luke says they murmured about Jesus saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Let me give you the David Freeman translation of that verse, "This fellow welcomes shady characters and even eats with them."

You probably know how reviled tax collectors were back in biblical days. They were shady characters indeed, the ones everybody loved to

hate. Here's how their tax system worked. A tax collector paid the Roman government in advance the tax that was due from his region. To front that kind of payment meant that tax collectors had to have significant resources. Once he paid the Roman government, he then had to go out and collect the taxes, replenish his front money, and make a profit, the emphasis being on the later. Tax collectors were notorious for abuse, corruption and their wealth.

Shady characters indeed.

The other group the Pharisees and scribes murmured about is referred to generically as "sinners." This is probably a reference to people who broke moral laws and who did not maintain ritual purity.

More shady characters.

The stage is set now for the two parables. The first is about a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. One became lost. Jesus said the shepherd left the ninety-nine in the wilderness and searched until he found the one that was lost. He called all his neighbors and friends together saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Why did he do that? When one who is lost is found, that is always a cause for rejoicing.

The twin parable is about a woman who lost a coin. The lost coin was one of ten coins. Today it would be worth about \$300. I don't know about you, but if I lost \$300 I would look diligently for it. Jesus said this woman sought until she found her lost coin. She called her neighbors and friends together saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." Why did she do that? You know.

These two parables share a common theme: the joy of finding what was lost. The lost sheep and the lost coin represent the lost people of their time, the tax collectors and sinners. They were lost to God and lost to community. The searching shepherd and the searching woman represent God. Don't overlook this feminine image of God. They are few, but there are feminine images of God in the Bible. This is one of them. The shepherd and the woman didn't just search until they grew weary. They didn't search until the sun went down. They searched until they

found. Then the celebration began. These two parables highlight the pleasure, the absolute joy of God, when one who is estranged from God and community is recovered. “I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents,” Jesus told them.

The scandal of this text, what the Pharisees and scribes could not grasp, is that these parables do not celebrate the purity of the Pharisees. They do not throw a party to rejoice about the scripture knowledge of the scribes. No, they celebrate reviled tax collectors who found welcome in the presence of Jesus. They celebrate morally loose sinners who repented and found welcome in the presence of Jesus.

That, Jesus was trying to tell them, was the purpose of his work. To call impure people to God. To invite the less-than-reputable into community. The purpose of his work was to search and search and search until he found those who were lost from God. When they were found, he said, that was cause for joy—in heaven and on earth. The question for the Pharisees and scribes was, “Will you join in the celebration?”

Good news for shady characters. Aren't we glad that the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for shady characters? The homeless people we'll serve dinner to tonight at the rescue mission. Young people covered with tattoos and body piercings. The gruff neighbor who treats you rudely. All those people we might not want around our dinner table or sitting in our pews. God has good news for them. The question for us is, “Will we join in the celebration?”

#### Closing Prayer

Lord, we thank you for the good news, the good news that is extended to everyone, the good news that one-day touched us. Amen.