

LOST AND FOUND Luke 15:1-10

A good amount of water has flown under the bridge since he said it, but a waspish remark of Groucho Marx still strikes a chord.

I never wanted to belong to any club
that would have me.

Every one of us has been there. Even in egalitarian America where belonging to the *wrong* club can disqualify a person from running for public office we have our subtle indicators of status. For the businessperson it is where one's office is situated in the total complex. For the academic it is where your department stands in the national ratings.

Some years ago, when I was a graduate student in Nashville, I regularly would greet and converse with an elderly matronal lady. We lived in the same housing complex. A widow of a very prominent banker, she had spent all of her life in genteel southern society. For some reason she was fascinated by my Australian accent. She took endless delight in correcting me in my pronunciation of local terms and place names. One evening, when I was walking through the parlor I saw her in her chair looking somewhat cross. Inquiring as to what was the matter she threw down the Sunday paper open at the two-page spread on weddings where there were pictures of the brides. "Can't they get this right," she said? "Don't they know the standing in the social register of my granddaughter? She should have her picture in the top right column. As the most prominent, that is where she belongs!"

I had to confess that I was unaware that there once was some significance of status in the placement of the pictures of local brides in the paper; but I did learn a lesson. There was a whole lot more I needed to know if ever I were to be acceptable in the polite society of Nashville. And so like Davy Crockett I came to Texas.

But I trust that you get the point. Even in this do-your-own-thing world with which we interact, we often devise subtle ways to exalt ourselves: to put ourselves into some elevated status in the social networks that are important to us.

This brings us to our text for today. Biblical scholars routinely tell students that the Pharisees in the New Testament are given a bad press, and from a number of perspectives that may well be true. There is no question that in their polite society they followed the appropriate social conventions with respect to how one should behave at table and what was the appropriate religious significance of the seating arrangements and the choice of food.

Where we come in with this text is that we discover that these Pharisees are grousing about Jesus. Deep down they know that Jesus is aware of their rules and social conventions. The problem is that he has nothing but *disdain* for such conventions. He knows that the Pharisees were bent on taking the Mosaic rules for the priesthood and imposing them on the regular folks of Israel. Most of these rules on matters of holiness and sexual purity were commendable; but there is more. And there it begins to bite. People could lose status and even find themselves excluded from table by being blind, lame, having some kind of skin disease, being small in stature or even having a visible birthmark. To Jesus this kind of way of awarding honor was unacceptable. It was incompatible with his prophetic vision of God's new world that he saw coming. Whatever it was it was not initiating the restoration of Israel.

Picking up with his inaugural announcement at Nazareth in Luke 4:18, quoting from the majestic verses of Isaiah, Jesus had stated earlier he has come to announce 'good news' to the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. And just before our text for today, in the home of a Pharisee, he tells those who will hear

But when you give a feast invite the poor, the
maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be
blessed (Luke 14:13-14)

Indeed, you will be repaid at the resurrection because these will be the people at the last banquet. Do you see what he has done? He has upended the conventional views of status and awarding honor.

Our Text

Luke reinforces this point by narrating two parables of Jesus. The point of both of these parables is incontrovertible. Those who are often overlooked, passed by, the discarded, in biblical terms "the lost," despite all conventional wisdom, have extraordinary value. Indeed their discovery of God's grace represents the very stuff, or center of the heart of God. There is inexpressible joy in their coming home to eat at table.

Luke loves to join two little vignettes featuring male and female together. In the birth stories he highlights Zechariah and Mary, Simeon and Anna. Later in Jesus' ministry it is the centurion and the widow (7:1-17), or the man planting the mustard seed and the woman with the leaven (13:18-21). Here it is the man going out to find the lost sheep and the woman seeking the lost coin.

The former parable on the lost sheep is a well-known and dearly loved story. So let us take a quick look at the latter -- the woman seeking the lost coin. What strikes me immediately

is the sheer ordinariness of her situation. She lived in a house that would be no larger than a regular room. There were no windows because she had to go and light a lamp to see. She got an old broom to stir up, probably a dirt floor, to find the coin she had lost. What is this? In the scale of things of global perspectives it would be hard to think of anything more insignificant! And yet when this woman found her coin what did she do? It was important for her. She calls her close circle of friends. She has them over and they celebrate. What was lost is now found.

Years ago I was with a woman who began to talk about her friend. Apparently the friend had changed her hairstyle and some of her acquaintances had said uncomplimentary things about it. A little impatient, I remarked that none of this was very significant. To which my friend responded, "To her it was very important!" I have always remembered that. So often it is what others consider "the little things" that are really important!

Recently, I was speaking with a minister in a church here in Austin. He and I were sharing how so few who are contemplating full time Christian service wish to do work in the setting of the local church. The minister said, "Apparently the idea of visiting the sick and caring for people as they transition through life's stages isn't all that interesting anymore!" Maybe so. Maybe we have forgotten that what is of genuine significance is what we so often discount as "the little things" -- the animal astray -- a coin that dropped in the dirt - a son living in a pig pen in a far away country.

But there is one who does see it. He cares. And he keeps the light on and the door open to welcome us home. Whether we see ourselves as one of these little ones who is overlooked or one who is called to minister in the name of Christ to the multitudes who wonder about their self worth, the sense of being found or coming home to the father above is the only lasting source of joy.

This is a key insight that broke out in Jesus' ministry. Let us not overlook it. May we continue to claim and proclaim it today.

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