

Knox Uniting Church Cluster

Sunday September 14th 2025 (RCL: Pentecost +14, Prop19 , Ord 24 - Year C)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Bayswater Uniting Church

Bible passages: Psalm 14 and Luke 15:1-10

“Pharisees and sinners”

Our gospel story today is about things being lost and found. I’m sure all of you will have a story about something valuable you lost, and then hopefully found it. My story is about losing something while overseas a few years ago. What’s the one thing you *never* want to lose when overseas? Your passport! Well, we lost our passports. Sophie and I were in Korea in a place called Busan. While there a typhoon struck Busan. We rushed to catch one of the last trains out of there before they were all cancelled due to flooding. In the rush we lost our passports, but didn’t realise until a few days later, when on our way to the airport in Seoul to fly home. So, we couldn’t leave the country. Eventually we found the passports – still at the station back in Busan. What a relief! 24 hours later than expected we were able to come home.

When Jesus told these lost and found parables, his listeners could certainly relate, just as we can relate today. But what was it that prompted these stories from Jesus? We are told in our reading that certain people among the crowd were gathering closely around Jesus to hear him, as in this picture:



Photo courtesy of Lumo Project Films

There were tax collectors, despised by most Jews for collecting money for the Romans. There were other ‘sinners’ according to Luke – a generic term to describe anyone who was not your typical law-abiding and upright citizen. Speaking of upright, there were those present who considered themselves very upright and righteous – the Pharisees who strictly and proudly adhered to the religious law, and the Scribes, experts in that law, who loved to analyse all the ways Jesus might be breaking that law. I’m sure the Pharisees and Scribes would not even like to be seen in the same photograph alongside tax collectors and sinners! (if that is, photos had existed back then!)

Now, Jesus would have no problem with that eclectic group gathering around to listen. But it was the grumbling and muttering of the Pharisees and Scribes that got him going, when they said to themselves (no doubt loud enough for all to hear), “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them!” (v2). Welcomes sinners and eats with them! I love that verse. What an accusation! How would you feel if that accusation was levelled at you?

My question is this: Who in this picture really are the righteous ones and who are the sinners? Jesus said, “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (v7). The irony of that statement was certainly not lost on Jesus, for despite his words inferring the Pharisees did *not* need repentance, they were perhaps the very ones who *did* need it most. The problem was that they just didn’t *believe* they needed to repent! They didn’t believe they were lost.

So Jesus tells these lost and found stories to show why he welcomes sinners and eats with them:



Lost...

...and found



A few things stand out in these stories. Firstly, it’s not just anything that is lost, it is something incredibly precious, meaning of course that sinners are precious to God. Secondly, there is the incredible effort to which the owner goes, to find the lost thing, meaning incredible God’s effort to find us. Thirdly, there is the delight and celebration when the precious thing is ‘found’, meaning God’s delight when we, as sinners are ‘found’ (in stark contrast to the grumbling and dour mood of the religious leaders!)

But there’s another thing, and this is interesting. The ‘being found’ in this passage, is inseparably linked to ‘repentance’. So, if our being found is what God does, as the searching ‘owner’, then it seems that our repentance – that is, our turning around, our new life, is much more about what God does than what we do. When you think about it, the sheep and the coin actually didn’t do anything on their own to be found!

This puts a different spin on 'repenting'. Often, we think repentance is our decision alone and it comes with remorse for our sins. Maybe that's not really what it's all about. Maybe, rather than it being our sorrowful effort to live a new life, repentance is God's gift of new life. It's his doing more than ours. It's what happens when God searches for and finds us! All we need to do is admit we are lost apart from him, and need to be found.

So, I ask again, who is righteous and who is a sinner in this picture? Which camp do they each see themselves in?



[return to first picture]

Earlier in the book of Luke, when Jesus had gone to eat at Levi the tax collector's home, he announced to the complaining Pharisees at the time, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance: (Luke 5:31-32). Again, we get the irony, because, at the end of the day, none of us are righteous on our own. We all need the doctor.

What I believe we should see, most of all, in these parables is the amazing hope and joy of being found. In our Psalm today we heard the lament of the writer who cries out: "O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion! When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people" (Ps 14:7). It's a longing for restoration as the shepherd longs to bring the lost sheep home. A restoration of all people and all creation, in fact. In finding us, through his Son, God brings to a broken world that gift of restoration, brings us back home to him. It's a gift of repentance! And there is so much hope and joy in that.

Of course, it follows that if we have received it, we need to pass it on. That's how the good news of the gospel works.

As I said before, Jesus is accused of 'welcoming sinners and eating with them'. I reckon that verse sums up the whole of Luke's gospel, since this is exactly why he came and exactly what he was pleased to be accused of. And he invites his followers – that's us, to join him in being 'accused' of welcoming sinners and eating with them.

As we know, the whole gospel story is about Jesus reaching out to the least, the last and the lost, along with the call to us to do the same. That means emptying ourselves of self-righteousness – a very hard thing to do, just as it was very hard for the Pharisees to do. It means standing with the least, the last, and the lost – standing proudly in the same 'photograph' as them, as one of them, as one who needs to be found and needs the repentance God gives. And as we receive it, we share it with those around us.

