

“Healing Hospitality” Luke 15:1-7 3/17/13

Recently, some of the members of our Lenten small groups interviewed folks who don’t usually go to church to try and learn what they thought about churches. (Some of us had a lot of anxiety about doing this!) When asked to describe church in a word, some folks used words like “intolerant” and “boring.” That was hard to hear, but we had anticipated some negative words, and tried to listen carefully to understand where people were coming from. But we also heard some positive words. One young man described church as “extended family, a place where people are closely connected.” We also asked people if anyone had ever invited them to come to church, and how they felt about that. This same young man said that he had been invited once, and that he felt honored that his friends would think enough of him to invite him to come! That’s a pretty positive reaction!

So, we learned that some people have significant barriers to overcome before they would be open to coming to church, while others are just waiting to be asked. Unfortunately, for the most part, we aren’t asking them. You see, we have barriers of our own. And that is nothing new. This morning’s scripture lesson tells of some barriers that existed in Jesus’ day. Listen to the first few verses of Luke 15 and see if you pick up on the barriers.

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to (Jesus).² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' (Luke 15:1-2)

The Pharisees and scribes were among the most religious people of Jesus' day. They were committed to the authority of the scripture and its proper interpretation. They tithed and gave generously to the poor. They were in church every week. But, they had a sense of self-righteousness that completely compromised their acts of piety. And they often criticized Jesus and his disciples for their close association with tax collectors and "sinners," something they scrupulously avoided as a matter of principle.

You see, tax collectors collaborated with the hated Roman occupying forces to collect taxes from their Israelite neighbors. And they regularly cheated people, collecting far more than was due to the Romans, and pocketing the difference. So they were hated as both traitors and cheats. "Sinners" was a category of people that were banned from participating in the synagogues. It included prostitutes, thieves, drunkards, and gluttons. Pharisees were not supposed to have any contact with such people. To eat with them was even worse, implying acceptance of them! The strict rules of the Pharisees were intended to preserve their identity as Jews, as God's chosen people, in the midst of hostile foreign influences. The rules were well-intended, but they served as a major barrier to anyone who

wanted to share their faith with their neighbors. And they criticized Jesus for his close association with such people. Listen to how Jesus responded. *So he told them this parable: ⁴“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. (Luke 15:3-7)*

That’s a great response, isn’t it? The story of the shepherd demonstrates that God not only loves, but is seeking diligently after lost people. He’ll even leave the other 99 to do so! And the end result is joy at finding the lost one. Contrary to the common Jewish saying of Jesus’ day that there is joy in heaven when one sinner is destroyed before God, Jesus says there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, who is found, who returns to God. God will not be bound by our rules, regulations, and other barriers. His love will not be thwarted in his pursuit of those who are lost and vulnerable. And God desires to use us in this endeavor to find and save the lost sheep.

Unfortunately, we have some barriers today that keep us from assisting God in reaching out to lost people. Maybe not the same barriers

as the Pharisees, but real barriers none-the-less. For example, some of us have been told from earliest times that we just shouldn't talk about religious matters with others. That religion is a private thing. That we should keep our religious thoughts and feelings to ourselves. That's a pretty big barrier to effectively sharing our faith with others, isn't it?

Others of us deal with the barrier of fear. We're afraid we might lose a friend if we talk about our faith. We're afraid we might be rejected. We're afraid we won't have all the answers to questions someone might ask us. We're afraid of looking foolish or being embarrassed. Fear is a real barrier.

I found the description of evangelism in Martha Reese's book, Unbinding Your Heart, to be helpful. She says you can look at evangelism as sharing something you enjoy with someone you like. Sharing something you enjoy with someone you like. I like that. I think most of us do that kind of thing in other parts of our lives. Maybe inviting someone to eat at a restaurant we like, or attend a club meeting with us, or to go to a sports event or music event. Sharing something you enjoy with someone you like.

Some of you know that I enjoy the sport of orienteering. It's a sport where you use a map and compass to find targets called "controls" that are laid out on a very large course, often in a state or national park. On a number of occasions, I have invited people to come with me and learn about the sport. Sometimes they accept. Sometimes they don't. It's not a big deal. Our friendship continues either way. Why can't we think of

inviting someone to church in much the same way? It's sharing something we enjoy with someone we like.

But there are some other barriers to sharing the faith that have more to do with us as a church. Sometimes when people come to church, they don't have a good experience. I mentioned orienteering a few minutes ago. When I first moved to Gettysburg, I went on-line and looked up the local orienteering club. They were having a meet at King's Gap, about 30 miles north of here, so I went. When I arrived I couldn't figure where to go in order to register and get my map. There was no signage anywhere that I could find. So I asked a few people and received vague directions. I felt like they were too busy to be bothered with me. I finally got to the registration table, and identified myself as a first-time participant. Again, there was no offer to assist me, to put me on a mailing list, or anything. I got my map and after a long wait was given a starting time. I did the course, but had almost no interaction with anyone from the club the whole time I was there. There were real barriers to becoming part of that club! I haven't been back.

I wonder about barriers here at GPC for new people. For example, most of our visitors come in through the Baltimore St. entrance their first time here. I know I did! Are they welcomed there? I wasn't! We are working on better signage in the parking lot to direct folks into the building through the Fellowship Hall, where we are better prepared to receive them.

But we're not there yet. We need your help to make sure people know we're glad they're here!

In addition, some people are new to worship, or at least new to Presbyterian worship. They are worried about standing or sitting at the wrong time or not being able to follow the service. They don't want to embarrass themselves. It's easy to assume that people understand everything we're doing in worship, but that's not always true! A few years ago a young woman started coming to one of our traditional services. After several visits, she told me that she enjoyed the service. She told me that she especially liked that song we sing each week. I didn't know what she meant. She didn't remember what it was called and couldn't remember the tune, but she thought we sang it sometime near the offering. It turned out to be the Doxology; it was new to her! Like many young people, she didn't know it, or the Gloria Patri or the Apostles Creed. I have found that I can no longer assume that people know the Lord's Prayer at weddings. Those in the wedding party often need it printed out. We work hard here in our worship services to spell everything out on the screen or in the bulletin, but we could probably do better to make it easier for new folks to worship. We welcome your suggestions to help remove unnecessary barriers from those who come here.

The Good News is that God loves lost people and is actively seeking them in spite of our personal and institutional barriers. People like young

parents who are overwhelmed with the responsibilities of work and family.

Retirees who are searching for meaning and purpose now that their work lives have ended. Folks whose marriages have ended in divorce. Widows and widowers who are just lost without their long-time spouse. People of all ages who are drowning in debt. Folks who carry a heavy load of guilt over past sins and failures. And God wants to use you to reach out to such people! As Jesus said, *“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”* You can do that by simply sharing something you enjoy with someone you like. Next week is Palm Sunday and Easter is the following week. It is a perfect time to invite someone to come to church with you. Watch the video that follows as you consider who you might invite to come to church with you.

<http://www.sermonspice.com/product/39002/easter-invite-me-in>