

“Strange Economies”

September 14, 2025

Psalm 51:1-10; Luke 15:1-10

The Reverend Stanley J. Jenkins
Market Square Presbyterian Church

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So he told them this parable: ‘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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost. Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost. Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.’

Luke 15:1-10

May the words of my mouth
And the meditations of all of our hearts
Be acceptable in thine sight
O God, our Rock and our Redeemer.
Amen.

Context is everything. Jesus’ teaching for this morning does not occur in a vacuum, as if it were some bit of general wisdom—but rather, as a specific response to a particular attitude of the religious establishment. Consider: Luke tells us, “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So Jesus told them this parable...”

So. Therefore. The parables that follow are a response to the pharisees and scribes—who are grumbling because Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. Who were these tax collectors? Tax collectors were Jews who collaborated with the Romans—for a fee. For a small consideration, as long as they collected the amount prescribed by the

Romans, they were free to extort from the people whatever they could get. They preyed on their own people—for personal gain.

As for the “sinners” with whom Jesus was eating, we don’t know what all was included under that specific characterization, but the very fact that these people are lumped in with tax collectors, suggests that their offenses were also in relation to the Roman occupation. For instance, in the gospels Jesus is also criticized for associating with prostitutes—clearly, not the most conventionally respectable of professions, right?—but even here, prostitution was a response to poverty, brought on by the relentless taxation of the empire—which fell disproportionately upon the poor. Remember there was no middle class in Ancient Palestine. Only two percent could be considered rich—which left 98 percent of the people in gradations of poverty.

The point to be made is that the pharisees and scribes, who would have been among the two percent, were judging Jesus for associating with people who had made difficult decisions in the face of crushing poverty. In other words, Jesus was responding to people who could well afford their so-called “purity.” They could, in fact, afford to turn their privilege into personal virtue, convincing themselves of their blamelessness before the law.

Now, the point here is not to judge the religious establishment or the two percent for that matter, so much as to point out the toxic effect that empire has on everyone involved. Rome picked who would be the high priest. Rome took a cut from the temple tax. Rome shored up the religious establishment—keeping them in their power and privilege—making sure that the few would cooperate in keeping the many in line. Rome divided and conquered.

It is no coincidence that it was the religious establishment that handed Jesus over to the Romans—and to be fair, what were the establishment’s options? Caiaphas the high priest, in the gospel of John, puts it succinctly: “...it is better for...one man [to] die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” That’s hard to argue with, right? It’s all for the greater good—which is also what all those Bishops said when they hushed up the crimes of abusive priests, because they feared if it got out, the damage to the institution of the church would be worse. In fact, if you follow this logic, they were really doing the church a favor, right?

Empire—or any system of domination—has a way of turning privilege into virtue—and in so doing making virtue itself, a tool of oppression.

Let’s be clear here. The takeaway isn’t how bad the pharisees and the scribes are, but rather how empire and the powers of this world—that is, sin—warp our perceptions and brainwash us into maintaining a broken system—ensuring that the cycle of oppressors and oppressed continues.

This is perhaps the point of Jesus’ teaching: “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” In judging others we maintain the whole vicious cycle of judgment, itself—ensuring that someone

else will judge us in return—which keeps us divided, one from another—which keeps us divided—and conquered—which keeps us under the thumb of the one Jesus called "the ruler of this world."

Charlie Kirk—what else needs to be said? It's no coincidence how quickly the powers that be sought to assign blame for his murder—sought to stoke the fires of retribution. Indeed—to the extent that we are kept busy looking for someone to blame for this individual event—or trying to defend ourselves against unjust accusations—to the extent that we are kept busy being at each other's throats—we are not asking who gains from the persistence of a system of political chaos and violence?

In any case, what is striking, in our two parables for this morning—given the context of the religious establishment's judging of Jesus—is how Jesus likens the tax collectors and sinners to sheep that get lost and coins that are misplaced—as if their lostness were something that happened to them. The emphasis here is not upon the culpability of the tax collectors and sinners—as bad as their acts may be—but rather upon God's overflowing, unrelentless, super-abundant—almost ridiculously absurd—mercy.

Indeed, it is the over-the-topness, the extremity of this mercy that is emphasized. What kind of business plan for building up a flock would include leaving ninety-nine sheep vulnerable to wild predators while the shepherd goes off and searches for just one lost sheep? Wouldn't the prudent shepherd just write it off as a loss? And in the second parable, we are told that a woman has ten coins—the word in the Greek for these coins refers to a full day's wage. The point is, she, unlike the vast majority of the people, is not living hand to mouth—she's got some savings—she might even own her own house. She's relatively to-do—but the extent to which she goes to find that one lost coin—let alone her gathering together of the neighbors to have a party when she finds it—is not commensurate with how the rich are expected to behave in this culture. The rich in this culture are expected to demonstrate their privileged position by throwing elaborate and lavish feasts to demonstrate to all just how little they have to worry about money—not to rejoice with the neighbors over the recovery of one measly little coin. In context her behavior is absurd. It's upside-down behavior.

The bottom line is that we are meant to laugh. To laugh at the absurdity of the good shepherd. To laugh at the rich woman who refuses to play her part in this system. To laugh at the system that makes such generosity seem absurd.

Indeed, from the point of view of this broken system, the true absurdity is that when God looks at tax collectors and sinners, God does not see people who need to be punished, so much as people who are lost—people who need to be found at all cost. They are people of infinite value—not a means to an end, but an end in and of themselves—not based on their virtues, their worthiness—their status—because in this broken system their virtues, and their worthiness, and their status, all depend upon the persistence of a system of oppression. To the contrary, they are people of infinite value based only upon God's infinite capacity and desire to find them—to redeem them from their lostness—to deliver them from this broken system of domination.

We are just simply loved. Just because.

Hear the Good News: we don't have to pretend to be something we're not. We don't have to judge others to deflect judgment on ourselves. We don't have to hide our own limitations by pointing out those of others. We just need to stand in the need of prayer. Stand in the solidarity of the need for prayer. We just need to learn to live like we are loved.

Friends, we are called to stop playing the devil's game of judgment and fear—the devil's game of divide and conquer. Pharisees and scribes, tax collectors and sinners—you and me alike—we are all just fiercely and completely loved and claimed. Our judgments upon one another just keep us in a state of being in which we find ourselves unable to accept God's love. May we open our eyes, again and again, and realize that God is always searching for us—that to God—absurd as it may be—we are all of infinite value. Amen.