

What is the lost coin in us? (Luke 15:1-10)

Can we reach the sinner inside and ask what keeps us from coming to the table?

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As a young philosophy professor teaching Plato's *Apology* to first-year students, I recreated the trial of Socrates and called for a vote. Every semester, Socrates was found guilty of corrupting the youth of Athens. At first this annoyed me. Then I realized that by teaching them to think for themselves and to reject the commonsense view that a majority vote establishes truth, Socrates was corrupting the youth, and so was I. That was my job as a philosopher.

What about preachers? Preaching the gospel is dangerous. This is mostly because of Jesus. Following Jesus gets us into good trouble, fast. As Barbara Harris puts it, "We are an Easter people living in a Good Friday world."

Breaking bread together was a big issue for the early church. Table fellowship is a key factor in the rejection of both John the Baptist and Jesus (Luke 7:31-35). John practiced table fellowship with no one, while Jesus freely ate and drank to the point where he was labeled "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (7:34).

One of the most radical aspects of Jesus' ministry is his association with outcasts: the lost. Who are these people in society today, and why are we afraid to associate with them?

Before mounting your high horse about inflexible and self-righteous Pharisees, can you get in touch with those traits in yourself? Can you reach the sinner in you and ask, What keeps the defiled parts of *you* from coming to the table? What in Jesus allowed him to associate with notorious "sinners"? What does this say about his relation to his own inner darkness?

As Walter Wink taught me to ask, What is the lost coin in me?

Table fellowship in the ancient world (and even today) represents a full embrace of those at the table. There is an inherent risk that you will be seen as condoning others' behavior. Take this test: If you condemned the actions of October 7 and grieve for Jewish hostages still not safely returned home, would you share dinner in your home with leaders of Hamas? If you awaken from sleep with images of the slaughtered children of Gaza and are unafraid to use the word genocide, would you break bread with President Netanyahu?

The temptation for preachers is to rush too quickly to Jesus' side in his confrontation with religious leaders over purity issues, especially as they relate to table fellowship (v. 1-3). The Pharisees are on safe ground, biblically.

The Jewish scriptures are replete with warnings about associating with “evildoers,” and Paul echoes these concerns when he urges the Corinthian church to separate themselves from those who are unclean (2 Cor. 6:14-18). Embracing Jesus the disturber of good order and virtue requires the rejection of what Luther called “a theology of glory” in favor of a “theology of the cross.” One is well advised to count the cost.

We should not miss the element of risk in the sheep parable, but we should observe its non-democratic spirit: 99 are left alone in the wilderness (not safely sheltered in a fold), and none of the majority sheep has a say in this. The one lost sheep matters enormously to the shepherd, enough to justify an enormous risk. That’s what God is like, the gospel tells us. It’s a kind of holy desperation. God pursues us like the hound of heaven; God will not give up.

To religious leaders who prize religious decorum and conformity with social norms, Luke offers two parables that are identical in structure; the parable of the lost coin amplifies the message of the lost sheep. Both parables issue in joy in heaven, while producing some gnashing of teeth on earth—including in the church.