



"And all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus" (Luke 15:1). What's it like to be invited to come near- to sit in the front pew where you can hear and see, when all your working life you have been relegated to the back if not outright told, "I'm sorry, we're full." "I'm sorry, we are all out of food- the meal you were counting on to quiet- at least for a night- the grumbling of your stomach." "I'm sorry, all the cots are full and you'll have to find somewhere else to sleep" as you turn around and head back out into the cold.

Or maybe a forced welcome smile- and you know that the smile isn't anything more than ingrained courtesy- it's not really meant to welcome who you really are.

A story is told about one of those old, venerable churches where the frozen chosen went. The building was grand. The people inside were faithful. They came each Sunday dressed up and smiled politely at those around them. They dutifully listened to the pastor and even though they didn't really agree with what he had to say, they still smiled and shook his hand as they left and said "good message; have a nice day" and went home to their Sunday dinner.

One day the procession had finished and people were settling in when they began to hear some rustling. And those in front did something unusual- they turned around to see what was going on. And what they saw amazed and discomfited them.

They saw a young man- a student by his dress of wholly jeans and tattered t-shirt and sandals walking down the aisle- just like he belonged. Well, look at that! Who does he think he is? What's he doing here? He doesn't even know how to dress for church!

And the young man kept walking and because the front pews were full -imagine that!- he just plopped himself down on the floor in front of the front pew. And the rustling continued- "we can't have that! What will we do when it's time to take communion? We'll have to walk right by him."

And then the congregation heard another sound from the back. A tap-tap-tap. And once again they turned around and saw the most venerable and upright usher slowly walking his way down the aisle. His cane tap-tap-tapping as he made his way down the aisle looking right and left and smiling at the people he passed.

And when he got to the front, he turned and smiled at that raggedy young man, and asked: "May I sit with you? I don't want you to be lonely." And without waiting for an answer, he slowly lowered himself to the floor. The two of them sat there for the rest of the service until it was time for communion.

And at the time for communion, the older man slowly got to his feet and smiled at the young man and said "Come on- The Lord is waiting for you. Come with me." A bit hesitantly, the young man got to his feet and went to the rail- and side-by-side they waited for the bread and the wine. But no one else came forward- they all waited to see, safe in "their" pews.

And then the older man took the paten from the priest, and gave the bread to the man with the words: "Take and eat. This is the bread of life. The life of our Lord Jesus Christ, broken for you- eat and be made whole. And drink this wine- the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, spilled for you for forgiveness of sins. Be washed in the blood and know that you are loved."

Silence reigned. No one knew what to do. What had just happened. Silence. And then the pastor slowly walked to the pulpit and said: "what if you are the only Bible that someone ever knows?"

Friends of mine who co-pastor a church have an interesting challenge. They serve a church that has had serious turmoil somewhat similar to St. John's. That church asked their pastor to leave and left behind very discouraged people who wondered if the doors could remain open- if they could become a viable house of God or perhaps whether they should throw in the towel and say, "well, a hundred plus years is a good run but we're done." The decision was made to try to rebuild- both the building and the people of God. Two years and a bit later, the church is doing pretty well- and now comes the challenge.

As my friends have worked with the church they have spent a good bit of time exploring values. And among the values the church holds is radical welcome. And one of the things they have done in that church is to put a small table with small chairs in front of the front pew- they have room to do that.

And they invited the young children to come forward and sit at this table during the service. And there are coloring books so that the children have something to do if they lose interest in the service.

One reason for the table up front is that a 3 or a 5 year old can't see over the pew- and so they sometimes fidget because they get bored. But sitting up front, they can see what's going on- and sit quietly or maybe do some coloring.

Well, the church values said they wanted children - at the time my friends arrived, there were none. And then there were 2 or 3 - and now the table is full. What to do.

Well, sure enough, there are two people who have become vocal about sending the children away. They make too much noise. They wiggle too much. They are too distracting.

What to do when values collide. What to do when the old order or way of doing things comes up against a new way that invites new people in. Growing pains.

We are all- each one of us- the 99 sheep or the 9 coins. We know our place and we stay there. We tend to think we don't need repentance – we live a life "right with God" - a righteous life.

We look askance at that one sheep who pushes the boundaries or heaven forbid!- goes astray. Good riddance we might say- he's just a troublemaker anyway. *Now* we can get back to doing things the way they've always been done. *Now* we can be with our own kind-the ones we know how to talk to- the ones who share our values.

God is not content to leave us 99 alone, safe in our building- safe in our routine. Jesus goes out to find that 1 lost sheep and brings it back and plops it down right in the middle of us. Jesus has a wonderful way of popping our balloon- of pricking our pretensions and challenging our assumptions- of presenting us with challenges like, "ok, we said we value children, but now that we have them, what do we "do" with them?"

Alice Goshorn, former Archdeacon in this Diocese, often used the phrase "Where are the growing edges." By that she meant, where is Jesus calling us to look for that lost sheep or the lost coin. Where is Jesus asking us to take a new look and see who might be the tax collectors or sinners or the outcast or the one who doesn't know "our norms" – the ones all around us who need me to sit with them on the floor so they aren't alone.

Being a lost sheep or a lost coin doesn't necessarily mean that we literally are lost or we outwardly have turned away from the life that God is calling us to. In fact, for most of us most of the time, it likely means that we have become too busy with the normal, routine things of our lives such that we no longer even see where we have gone astray. We no longer even realize that we no longer are asking the "Holy Spirit [to] in all things direct and rule our hearts."

Return to the reading from Timothy: "I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me...I received mercy... and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (1 Tim.12-13).

When you get caught up in living everyday life, when you know that you are stressed with too much on your plate- and even on those days when you feel lost – remember that Jesus is with you, sitting on the floor beside you. Remember that you may, all unknowingly, be the only Bible that someone ever knows.

You are never alone- you are never truly lost. Jesus searches 24/7 for the one sheep or the one coin. Each has value. Each is a reason to celebrate.