

# Eating with Jesus, eating with the Father

Luke 15:11-32

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## Introduction

The Christian faith is about God – of course – and of people. It is about people looking for God, but much more – about God looking for people.

And because God is looking for people, He wants his church to be looking for people. Our mission to care for people comes directly from the character and the heart of God.

So each time when we wonder who God is – and we do this each week in church – our feet are put on the path of mission to all people. He loves all people, and therefore we love all people. He searches for people, and that is why we do the same.

## Not all people are interested in other people

At least, that is the ideal. In reality, not all people are interested in other people. Even many people who desire to obey God, find it hard to be open to others.

Last week we read and discussed some stories Jesus told his listeners – a story of a shepherd who lost a sheep, and of a woman who lost a coin. Jesus told these stories to the Pharisees, a religious Jewish sect that was known for being very strict. They did not want to mix with bad people.

Jesus however was eating with those people that were seen as bad – sinners – by the Pharisees. Their attitude was: keep bad people as much as possible at a distance.

Jesus however warmly received all such people in his personal space – and Jesus had dinners with them. Those people *were* ritually unclean according to the laws of Israel, but Jesus warmly embraces them.

## Jesus aims to bring sinners home

Jesus begins to answer *why* he enjoys feasts with those sinners, by telling the parables of the lost sheep and of the lost a coin. The sheep was found, and therefore the shepherd feasted. The coin was found, so the woman threw a party.

And then, he tells us the parable of the Prodigal Son. A story that also ended in a feast, a party in the house of the Father of the lost son.

What an emotional story. We can maybe see the first two parables as an introduction, but now Jesus is really going to answer the Pharisees.

First Jesus shows that he takes sin seriously. He describes a young son who decides to leave his father. I do not doubt that those who heard this parable were aware that Jesus was using the father in the story as the symbol for the heavenly Father, God Almighty.

The younger son who left his father lived a loose life; he wasted his money, and ended up in the mud with dirty unclean pigs. Totally forbidden for a Jewish man.

Mind you, this sinful lifestyle is not the core of the problem. The heart of the problem is leaving the Father and acting as if he does not exist, as if he were dead. The problem is more on the side of a lack of love than a lack of ritual purity. The heart of sin is being separate from God.

This is an important lesson from these stories. Being lost is not due to leading a wild life, but the wild life is the result of being lost. Being lost means: not being attached to God, our Father in heaven. Not being where the shepherd is. Not being on the necklace with the other coins.

The story of the prodigal *also* shows us how deep the love of our heavenly father is. He wants each person who is lost to return to him. The coming of the Son of God to our world is part of the great *search party* of the Creator. He wants his family to be complete! He wants all sons and daughters to be with him in his house.

The son was hungry, humiliated, homesick, and he returned to the father, dirty, exhausted, impure from his contact with the pigs; he was, of course, not ritually purified.

He returns to his father's house as a man laden with sin and guilt. But he returns – he returns!

That is the big issue! And immediately the father embraces him. He welcomes him, and eats with him. The Pharisees response: 'How dumb of the father, now he is also impure. Now he cannot pray to God...'

But the father is not worried about being defiled by his son's life; his sole happiness is that his son has returned home.

The father in the story organizes a magnificent party with much meat and wine, and the feast had all that was needed to express the joy that his son, who once was lost, had now been found! He was dead but now alive again!

In all three parables, the climax is the feast. And this is what Jesus is saying: 'I enjoy big meals

and feast with these sinners – *because they have been saved.* Jesus is not saying: ‘I welcome them and I feast with them in order that they may be saved.’

He does not eat as an evangelism method – though that would be great as well. But in this case he says: ‘These people were lost, and thanks to God’s love, they have been found, and therefore we feast together!’

‘You Pharisees do not want to touch them, but they are the children of God who have returned to the Father and therefore we must celebrate!’

Are these people who were lost and are now found, perfect people? Do they obey all the laws of God? Have they already learned to be nice and polite as good church people? No! But that does not matter. They were lost, and they are found! They have returned to the Father!

To the Father? I can see the Pharisees think...

Is Jesus comparing himself with the father in the story, who throws a party because the son has returned? Does he put himself in the place of God? Yes, I think that may be exactly what Jesus is doing.

Why does Jesus feasts with those people?

Well, because a shepherd feasts when a sheep is found; because a woman feasts because a coin is found; because a father feasts when his son is found.

### **Drawing near Jesus and God**

In the first verse of Luke 15 we read that the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to Jesus – *to listen to him.* They desired to be close to Jesus for his words. Is this not what we desire today? To be close to Him and hear from him?

The apostle James, in his letter, says: “Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you...”(James 4:8)

When the prodigal was drawing near his father, even before he had fully reached him, the father ran to him. How embarrassing to see that village *‘umda* run to his son! That was against the customs of those days - worthy people do not run! But love is stronger than custom... God draws near to those who want to be with him.

If we want to come to God through Jesus Christ, God honors our very first small step and begins to embrace us, to draw us deeper and deeper into his love, away from our old life of sin and misery and loneliness and being lost.

But Jesus has more to say, about the Pharisees, when he speaks of the older son in the parable.

Interesting is that we read that the tax collectors and sinners drew near to Jesus to listen – and thereby they were saved. The prodigal son drew near to his father and was saved.

But the *older son* also draws near. It says in Luke 15:25 – “he drew near... “ No, *not* to the father, but *to the house.* He came close to the house, but quarreled with the father.

We must be careful with parables that we do not try to explain every word and sentence. They are good stories with a central lesson, and not every detail of the story has a special meaning. But in this case, I cannot restrain myself.

The older son drew near the house, not to his father. The Pharisees were so used to going to the House of Father, the temple. The Temple was called the House of the Father by Jesus – for example, in the Gospel of John, when He drives all merchants out of the Temple, he says: ‘You shall not make the House of my Father a house of trade.’

Is Jesus with these the parable of the Prodigal maybe telling these Pharisees that they were greatly pious in going to that *house* of the father, but that they did not even come close to the father, the owner of the house, *himself*?

The sinners they detested so much had been lost but were now saved. They were in the house with God and Jesus. They were drawing near to Jesus to listen to him. They wanted to learn from him.

But the Pharisees excluded themselves from being in the House of God by not showing love to ‘those sinners’. Their refusal to even come close to them, also excluded them from drawing near to Jesus and listening to him.

### **Conclusion**

I learn a few lessons from these three parables.

Eating with Jesus means eating with the Father. Today we do so in Holy Eucharist. We feast with our Lord who treats us to all we need.

God desires people to return to Him, and we must be very careful that we are not a stumbling block for other people to return to God.

Just like Jesus we must always be inviting all people to come to Jesus Christ and listen to him. And we do this not as people who are better than others; with all people we want to listen to Jesus, to learn from him.

But be careful to not keep far away from those people considered bad or sinful; Jesus desires to be with them, to draw them into the orbit of love and light of God.

And as a church, these parables ultimately set us on the path of mission. God searches like a shepherd for each sheep; he searches for a coin like a poor woman; as a father he searches for his lost son.

And that is the attitude of our church.

Anyone who desires to come closer to Jesus and listen to him, is welcome *here in our midst!* A change of life and lifestyle is important, but the heart of the matter, for all people, is to first be connected with Jesus Christ. So as *Church* that is what we *focus* on.

That is what we must also do personally. Draw near to Jesus, and listen to him. And if this is our desire, if this is what we do, then the Father welcomes us with arms wide open. Then our Lord Jesus feasts with us, feeding us with bread and wine.

**Amen**