

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
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Jeremiah 4:1 –12, 22–28
Luke 15:1–10

FAITH MATTERS

I wonder this morning if we are able to admit that our table fellowship reveals so much more than we readily admit to feeling. Does it ring true that we make a habit of sharing meals with those we like—those that are most like us, those that are pleasing to be around. So, in essence, we decide with whom we will share food based on the relationship boundaries we have put into place. Another way to say this is that our church attendance defines with whom we would like to go and share a meal or share time in conversation. Our church attendance in some ways translates into our choosing to include some while neglecting others.

According to Luke, Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep because some Pharisees were complaining about who Jesus was taking to lunch. In essence, I believe they were complaining about who he *wasn't* taking to lunch—them. The issue was about inviting and welcoming—and even engaging in conversation—those who were less worthy than they considered themselves. Maybe the whole issue is found right there in verse one. Maybe it's imbedded in those words. It says, "All the tax collectors and sinners" were coming to listen to him. I wonder what Jesus was saying that was making it so easy and inviting for those who wouldn't normally come to be in his presence. What was he sharing that caught their attention?

Even more interesting would be the question: What was Jesus saying to them that caused them to repent? Coming back to church—coming back into the fold—represents being in a place where God can use us, can work with us, can change our futures. And maybe that's how we should see these parables. There will be more joy in heaven over one person willing to surrender to God than over a multitude that has it all figured out. More joy over one person who's willing to sacrifice their independence than over a whole congregation—those ninety-nine or more who already feel secure and nurtured, as if they have arrived, rather than feeling they still need to strive to complete the journey that God calls all of us to share.

Fred Craddock is a renowned biblical scholar and preacher. He notes how in Luke, Chapter 15, there are three parables which are in fact parables we refer to either out of habit or out of misunderstanding terms: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, the prodigal (which we'll share next week). Craddock says it's interesting because these parables really are stories that are positive, not negative: the parable of the found sheep, the found coin, the loving father. When did we start calling them the lost parables? Isn't the point Jesus makes is that we have the opportunity to be found? And when we do, when we are found, we want to come here and share it with one another. The gospel tells us first and foremost that God loves us, that our sins are forgiven because of this love. That God has created the church. Jesus has instituted the church to remind us that God truly delights in our company.

I want us to pause for a moment. Someone said to me last week they really liked it when I gave homework. Maybe because it's the beginning of school. I don't know. Maybe it's that longing to truly be a teaching elder again, as we used to refer to ministers. But I want you to take home some homework. I want you to ponder the question, "Why does your faith matter?" Or more generically, "Why do you come to church?" And I'd like you to turn your homework into me this week. Call. E-mail. Leave a message on the voice mail. I really want to know why we all believe it's so important to come to church. Why does faith matter so much? And like any good teacher I'm going to answer the question with another question: Who in this community has consistently acted like they love you? From whom did you first experience acceptance that reflects God's acceptance? Who acts like they are absolutely delighted to see you every week?

Are these common experiences you have when you come to Bush Hill Presbyterian Church? Do you feel loved? Do you feel accepted for who you are? Not for whom you pretend to be? And does anybody act like they just are thrilled to be in your presence?

You know where this is heading? In order to share those kinds of experiences, we have to make others feel loved, don't we? So there's a third question: Who are you in relationship with here that knows they don't have to worry about past mistakes, that you will always accept them. And who makes you happy—joyous—because you are in a relationship? Who do you make joyous with your conversations, with your prayers for them, with just your simple willingness to be there with them?

God invites us to experience the forgiveness, and that forgiveness always convinces us that God enjoys our company. So there are reasons that we exist, that we come to church. I still want you to turn in your homework, but remember the covenant that we share. Remember the constant reminder to turn from evil. And remember the joy of your salvation. Amen.