

Proper 19 C 2019

Exodus 32:7-14  
Psalm 51:1-11  
1 Timothy 1:12-17  
Luke 15:1-10

Today let's start with a riddle:  
How is a parable like a truffle?

Like a chocolate truffle,  
That is.

If a chocolate truffle is a small,  
One-bite wonder,  
At its best  
A tiny, carefully crafted melding of surprising flavors  
And colors and textures,  
Intended to intrigue and delight,  
And if a parable –  
What is a parable?

We could spend a long time  
Looking for the meaning of the word "parable."  
But let's start here:  
A parable is a story  
In which truth plays hide and seek.  
A parable is a story  
Where concrete things and people and events  
Help us get closer to an abstract truth.  
A parable is a story,  
And when we hear it,  
Truth opens up inside us.

So,  
How is a parable  
Like a chocolate truffle?

Two ways.  
First, context matters.  
The presentation of the truffle,  
Whether in a crumpled twist of wax paper  
Or a beautiful box,  
Is part of the event.  
And the setting of the parable really matters.

Again, how is a parable like a truffle?  
In this way:  
Both are best eaten in one bite.

When you pick up the tasty little morsel,

You can take a tiny nibble,  
Then look at it, sniff it,  
Take another tiny nibble  
To identify the different elements and ingredients,  
And keep picking away at it.  
Or you can take a generous bite,  
And notice the surprise of flavors  
You might never have thought to put together,  
And perhaps pause a moment  
In recognition, even gratitude,  
For the imagination and skill  
Of the one who made it.

It is the same with a parable.  
When you hear it,  
You can choose to pick it apart,  
To assign meaning to each separate element and character,  
And then make something out of the scattered pieces.

Or you can take the whole thing in one bite,  
Enjoy the surprise,  
And perhaps even say,  
I never would have imagined that.

Jesus invites us,  
Over and over,  
To imagine something new  
When we get inside his parables,  
Or when they get inside of us.

Today, he invites us to imagine –  
What?

What is happening in the stories  
Of the lost sheep and the lost coin,  
Two parables that speak of losing and finding,  
And of joy?

First of all,  
Remember that context is important.  
When does Jesus tell these stories?  
When the religious leaders of his day grumble,  
“this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

One thing you can say,  
They have really understood the mission  
And the message of Jesus.  
They don't like it, but they understand it.

Jesus' mission is to find those who are left out,

Left over, left behind,  
And bring them to the party.  
Jesus' message is this –  
Everyone is welcome at the table.  
Everyone.  
There are no sinners in the house of God.  
In the house of God,  
Sin is a term that no longer has any meaning.

If sin is anything that separates us from God,  
And sinners are those who experience separation from God,  
Then, by definition,  
Those who are in God's house,  
Eating at God's table,  
Cannot be sinners.  
And since Jesus invites and welcomes all of us  
While we still believe we are separated from God –  
Sinners, some would call us –  
As if he didn't think it mattered,  
And since we cannot be called sinners  
If we are eating at God's table,  
Right next to God,  
It must be that at the moment of welcome,  
The moment of taking, breaking, and sharing bread,  
Sin recognizes its irrelevance, and slinks away.

Sin really does matter.  
And it really doesn't.

There will always be plenty of sin to go around.  
There will always be plenty of people,  
You and me among them,  
Doing things on purpose or by accident,  
Things we know  
Will grieve those who love us,  
Ruin our health,  
Make us feel like running away from the truth.  
There will always be plenty of people  
Who indulge in cruelty and violence,  
As they themselves have been victims of cruelty and violence,  
Or carelessness, or neglect.  
There will always be people  
Who rob others of their dignity,  
Who deny the full humanity of every person,  
Who despoil the earth,  
Who invite us to despair.

There will always be corporate structures  
That value their own success  
Over the well-being of the people within them.

There will always be vast, untamable powers  
That threaten chaos and confusion.  
We will always experience an unbridgeable,  
Unfathomable gap opening up before us.

At least as long as we experience life  
In time and space, there will be within each of us  
An abyss,  
A something  
that makes a division  
Between us and God,  
Or us and the world,  
Or the world and God,  
A division we can call sin.

Jesus knows that division is there.  
But his life and work is to overcome it.  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To invite the unwanted.

He invites us to come with him,  
To let ourselves be found  
And then become finders,  
To let ourselves be healed  
And become healers,  
To discover the gift of the parable.

To do that, let's ask again –  
What is the presentation of the parable?  
Like a truffle,  
Does it come in a bit of crumpled wax paper?  
A shiny box in some delectable color?  
What is its context?

For Jesus,  
The context  
Was the scandal he caused  
By ignoring one of the foundations of his world,  
The divisions that kept the righteous –  
Those who identified themselves as righteous –  
Safely separated from those they identified as sinners.  
A system in which the righteous  
Got to make all the rules  
And benefit from them.  
(Sound familiar?)  
The table was where those divisions  
Were most clearly enforced.  
Only the righteous were welcome at the table.  
The mission of Jesus,

Is to bring everyone to the table.  
Together.

What does that mean for us?  
Our purity laws look different now,  
But we have plenty of ways  
Of keeping ourselves safe from others,  
Whoever the other is.  
Others have other others,  
But almost all of us,  
If we are honest,  
Are invested in keeping some dividing lines intact.

So what happens  
If we let the parable into our divided world?  
Into our troubled souls?  
What happens if we swallow it in one bite?

How do we hear these stories of losing and finding,  
Of overcoming barriers,  
In the midst of a world like ours?

What is Jesus talking about,  
When he tells this parable to us?  
Remember he is talking  
About who's included  
And who is left out on purpose.  
He's talking to people who are grumbling.

So what does he do,  
When faced with the grumblers?

The unexpected.  
Rather than scolding or shaming,  
He talks about joy.  
Joy in heaven, joy on earth.  
Joy when the lost is found,  
Joy when the left out are welcomed in.

Listen to these parables as stories of joy.  
Remember what it is like to find or be found.  
Imagine what it is like to have Jesus come  
And take you by the hand,  
And say,  
You are the one I want at my table.  
Come and sit down and eat with me.  
You, and everyone else.  
Everyone. All together.

Take these stories,

Enjoy them,  
Admire them,  
And then eat them in one bite.  
Hear Jesus say, "Rejoice with me."

This is why we are here, to rejoice at the table together.

Together, in community,  
We are Jesus' guests at his table,  
And we act as hosts in his name.

We are Christ's body now in the world.  
His mission and his message are ours now.  
That means we are here  
Not only to rejoice at the table,  
But to help him prepare the table,  
Making sure there is room for all,  
And to help him find and invite the guests.  
We are hosts as well as guests.

There are many parables  
That show us ways to make that real.  
Today, those parables  
Speak of losing and finding,  
Of welcome and sharing,  
Of going out to find the lost  
Who are far away,  
And lighting a lamp to find the lost  
Right under our noses.

Looking within,  
And looking beyond.

As we gather here today,  
Let's see ourselves  
Through the lens of joy.  
As we gather at the table,  
As we go from the table  
Out into a confusing,  
Scary,  
Distressing world,  
Let's hold on to joy.  
And let's ask,  
Who and what is missing?  
Where do we need to look?  
Who and what will we find?

We are in a new time of looking,  
Here in this church.  
We are looking for a new way forward

To live into our vision and mission.  
A new way that does not displace  
All that we do already,  
But crowns our life together  
With fresh meaning, purpose, vigor.  
We don't know it yet,  
But when we find it,  
We will know.

We who have been found  
Are finders now.

We will know,  
And we will say,  
As Jesus says,  
I have found what I had lost.  
Rejoice with me.