

*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*  
**Sunday closest to September 14**



Proper 19  
Year C  
RCL

1 Timothy 1:12-17  
Psalm 14  
Luke 15:1-10

The Collect

O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

## **1 Timothy 1:12-17**

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

**Psalm 14 Page 598, BCP**

*Dixit insipiens*

- 1 The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God."  
All are corrupt and commit abominable acts;  
there is none who does any good.
- 2 The LORD looks down from heaven upon us all,  
to see if there is any who is wise,  
if there is one who seeks after God.
- 3 Every one has proved faithless;  
all alike have turned bad;  
there is none who does good; no, not one.
- 4 Have they no knowledge, all those evildoers  
who eat up my people like bread  
and do not call upon the LORD?
- 5 See how they tremble with fear,  
because God is in the company of the righteous.
- 6 Their aim is to confound the plans of the afflicted,  
but the LORD is their refuge.
- 7 Oh, that Israel's deliverance would come out of Zion!  
when the LORD restores the fortunes of his people,  
Jacob will rejoice and Israel be glad.

**Luke 15:1-10**

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”



## SERMON

I was the kid who lacked social skills. It drove my mother nuts. She would throw me in with all these nice Presbyterian kids, and I'd go stand by the wall. She would then peel me off the wall and tell me, "No man is an island". She was trying to say that I should make friends with her friends' kids. I was stubborn and chose the kid across the street, and a Jew into the bargain, as my best friend. I was a considerable disappointment to her.

Mom didn't really know where that phrase, "No man is an island" came from but it's from a poem by John Donne<sup>1</sup>

No man is an island,  
Entire of itself,  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.

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<sup>1</sup> 1572 – 1631

If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.

As well as if a promontory were.

As well as if a manor of thy friend's

Or of thine own were:

Any man's death diminishes me,

Because I am involved in mankind,

And therefore never send to know for whom the bell  
tolls;

It tolls for thee.

Mom was right about one thing – we are born into community and suckled by it. Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind; it is my community. For the past two Sundays, I've been sneaking in some thoughts about community, both the good and the bad, for community can be used for good or it can blind us to good and lead us to evil.

To illustrate the positive influence of community, last week I told you the elephant's tale of five blind men trying to describe an elephant by touch only. Their re-



sulting confusion about what an elephant might be illustrates how easily we can, without the support of a community, wander off into the tall weeds from which we are never heard again. Community offers us an environment in which we can share our individual findings on the nature of elephants and reach a better conclusion than we would by ourselves. That's the positive side of community, but it is not the full story.

To show how community can lead us into dreadful wrong, I told you the starfish story recounting how one man was so moved by a child who was throwing stranded starfish back into the ocean that he started the Starfish Appreciation and Protection Society, or SAPS. There were thousands of stranded starfish on the beach, he reasoned. To save them would require the efforts of a community but the poor SAPS became so focused on their community that they never noticed that they were

crushing stranded starfish under their feet while going to and from meetings. This is the dark side of community — we can make an idol of our community and lose sight of the wrongs we do in pursuit of it. This seems to have happened again when it was revealed this week that Oklahoma State University had come to think of a successful football program as the ultimate good and appears to have permitted the shuffling of money under the table in furtherance of it, certainly something about which we have never heard before in any other football program.

Community is vital, but only as an aid to enlightenment, not as the ultimate good. When the good of the community becomes the goal you have constructed a cult. Community should help us recover our relationship with God, but it must not become a substitute for it. Community only helps us find the way. My dog un-

derstands this perfectly. If I drop food on the floor and point to it, Sarge will follow to where I'm pointing and get the reward. Gizmo the cat will stare endlessly at my finger and go hungry.

In our passage today, people are drawn to hear what Jesus says, some because they are interested,

**All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus.**

and some because they had an interest in a community they believed was being threatened by Jesus,

**... the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."**

As in many of the Gospel stories the cast of characters here is upside down. Those you would expect to listen to Jesus, the religious professionals, grumbled while those who had much to lose sought Him out. Remember that the tax collectors were Jews who were in cahoots

with Rome and got rich by it. Any repentance by them is going to involve going home to mama and telling her they aren't going to be rich anymore.

The “sinners” were even more challenged. They were the secular Jews, Jews who broke the moral laws or perhaps did not follow the rigid purity practices of the Pharisees — lukewarm Jews, you might say. Any repentance by them is going to involve a commitment to trust in God which had previously been lacking in their lives. Yet, the non-religious Jews and the Roman collaborators gathered around Jesus, called by a force even more compelling than their own self-interest or their chosen apathy.

The grumblers are the Pharisees and scribes. All your lives you've heard “the Pharisees and the scribes” as shorthand for “the bad guys”. They were nothing of the sort. The Pharisees were the Amish of their time —

those who had committed themselves to live within their understanding of God's law. The scribes weren't lawyers as we know them. Don't think of a rodent-like man in an expensive suit. Think of an Oxford theologian. They were the scholars of the Scriptures.

The scribes and the Pharisees had made life-time investments in their communities. It is not surprising, then, that after all that work they were led to a prideful certainty that membership in their communities granted righteousness. Like the poor SAPS who unknowingly crushed the very starfish they were trying to save beneath their feet, the Pharisees and the scribes had come to believe that their communities embodied everything that was righteous, exceptional and pleasing to God. They believed in the concept of Pharisaical exceptionalism, in other words. You were either with them and righteous, or against them and unrighteous. It is a terri-

bly hazardous meal, exceptionalism. It is a double fudge brownie with butter cream icing and a scoop of vanilla ice cream on the side. Inside the brownie, though, there are worms and filth. Coming to believe in the exceptionalism of your community leads you far from God into fields tended by a farmer you would not like at all.

So, people without a community and people living lives which were deceitful toward their community were drawn to listen to Jesus by their sense of something within them which was missing or shriveled up. Those who had made of their community a substitute for what was missing in their lives grumbled and could not hear Him.

For me, the first group — the ones who gathered to listen to Jesus — are by far the more interesting. These were the ones who recognized that they weren't right-

eous, that something was missing from their lives. The sinners and the tax collectors came to seek change and Jesus represented change. The Pharisees resisted change by hiding within their own notions of the exceptionalism of their communities.

Earlier in the week I began to think about how I could present these two conflicting realities of community to you in a clear and helpful way. As I always do, I consulted endless dusty volumes, re-reading the Confessions of Augustine and The Institutes of Calvin. In Latin. The whole time, there was this...bug in the back of my head. Finally, I gave into the bug, put down the dusty volumes and suggested to Kathy that we should watch a movie. Not just any movie, but one of the two gifts of ministry I received from this church when I began here, six years ago. The first gift of ministry, of course, was the gift of humility which Ned gave me.

You hired me on the basis of one sermon and some paper airplanes. My pride fed richly on that. Ned told me I would be the savior of this church, which is just exactly the sort of nonsense that was rattling around in my head, then told me that I wasn't special – I was cheap. That was exactly what I needed to hear and has been my mantra ever since – remember that you are not special. You're cheap. That was the first gift of ministry you gave me.

The second gift of ministry came from Tom. He left the movie “Joshua” for me to watch. In the movie, a thinly-disguised Jesus arrived in a small town. The African American Baptist Church had been destroyed by a storm and allowed to sit in ruins. Joshua began work on rebuilding the church and before long the entire community, both Protestant and Catholic, had joined together to work in harmony. The part of the



scribes and Pharisees was played by F. Murray Abraham as a Caiaphas-like Catholic priest who opposed everything that Joshua attempted to do. Instead of celebrating the wonder that was being played out before his eyes, he saw Joshua as a threat to his position as senior priest and to the church he represented, just as our Pharisees viewed Jesus. The Pharisees and the scribes, who had worked so hard at their trade, could not grasp that there could be righteousness outside their communities, so they could not join in the celebration among the angels over the repentance of even one sinner. In their view, they had earned their position in God's esteem by their own hard work, and any hint that righteousness could exist outside their community or that God might love all His children devalued their certainty in their own exceptionalism, their favored place in God's affections.

Yes, living within community is God's design for us.

No man is an island,  
Entire of itself,  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.

Living within community keeps us together in love and mutual respect so long as we do not make an idol of our community and instead recognize that though we're not special we are, nonetheless, loved. It would be well to keep that in mind.

AMEN

*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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