

*15Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3So he told them this parable: 4"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? 5When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6And 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.' 7Just 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. 8"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? 9When 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.' 10Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

I learned a shocking fact a few weeks ago. A speaker at a gathering of pastors told us that in terms of personal health the pastors, Associates in Ministry and other church workers in the ELCA Health care program rank in the bottom ten percent when we are compared to groups with similar income and responsibilities in business and industry. Ninety percent of the groups we are being compared to are healthier. That means that congregations are paying more for health insurance because of the poor health of those who work for them. It means that the out of pocket amounts that pastors and Associates in Ministry are paying have been skyrocketing in the past few years.

That fact helped explain a new program that begins next year. Those who undergo a health assessment and then follow the recommendation of that assessment will be rewarded with dollars that can be applied to their deductibles. Now when I heard about this new program I was not happy. I mostly watch what I eat, I quit smoking years ago, I exercise daily. Since I am already doing these things I am guessing that I will not be rewarded for continuing to do them. But someone else who has been eating unwisely and making no effort to exercise will be

given credits for doing the very things I have been doing all along. The people who have been making bad health decisions will be rewarded and those who have been working hard on this all along will be passed over. Something is wrong with that!

Yes, I have been feeding my self-righteous anger about all of this pretty regularly until I started thinking about today's gospel reading.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Grumbling. Just like me. And for kind of the same reason. No, Jesus was not handing out credits for their medical deductibles. But he was eating with tax collectors and sinners. Identifying with them, showing favor to them.

Now we know from reading in this gospel that Jesus was on the guest list of some Pharisees. Twice he went to a Pharisee's home to dine. In inviting him they were reaching out to him. But Jesus seemed to prefer the company of tax collectors and sinners. Pharisees devoted their whole life to pleasing God – every day devoted to pleasing God. but tax collectors were devoting their lives to serving the hated enemy Rome and serving their own pocketbooks. And sinners were devoted to their pleasures – even pleasures that God had commanded they have nothing to do with. No wonder the Pharisees were grumbling.

Jesus told three parables – three stories all with the same point. First, the story of the lost sheep and the shepherd who leaves the 99 to look for the lost one. And when he finds it he rejoices and invites his friends and neighbors to join in his rejoicing.

Second is the story of the woman who lost one of her ten coins, lit a lamp, swept the dirt floor of her house and searched until she found it. Then she too calls her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her.

The third parable is of the father with two sons – the youngest demands his inheritance and goes off and wastes it. Then hungry and alone he returns to be greeted by his father with a great feast. The older brother has been faithful all along and is angry that there has been a party for his brother.

Three stories declaring the joy of God when the lost is found – when the prodigal returns. For the Pharisees these stories are a question – will you join in God celebrating the lost being found?

Will I celebrate sisters and brothers in Christ working to have better health or will I be narrow- minded and mean-spirited toward them? The truth is that their improved health will benefit me – maybe we will move up from our place as the most unhealthy group and the costs for all of us will go down.

Could the Pharisees have joined in Jesus party with tax collectors and sinners? One Pharisee named Paul did years later – he became the greatest spokesperson for Jesus.

The other day I asked a class what the purpose of this congregation is? The first answer I received was, “Our purpose is to reach out to those who do not know Jesus and follow Jesus and to bring them in.” This was the very answer that Jesus wanted the Pharisees to understand. God is not in the business of gathering some elite team – just the truly faithful ones - but in Jesus God is gathering all - lifelong Christians – sinners repenting – seekers who are just nibbling at the edge of life with Christ - Jesus is embracing all.

Churches that are healthy are churches that look outward – they see the needs of those on the outside and help them, serve them, reach out to them. Churches that are unhealthy focus on self, on us and our own. Like the older brother in the parable they cannot join in the party Jesus comes to bring.

Open your arms in welcome, open your hands in service, open your hearts in love. And celebrate with Jesus. Amen.