

## Party Stories

Last Wednesday night a bunch of us were gathered in the Westminster Room for a Bible study. We were looking at the Gospel of Matthew, but before diving in, we took a side trip to a city in Syria called Dura-Europos. If you've never heard of Dura-Europos, don't worry. It's a little out of the way, being in Syria not far from the Euphrates River.

Dura-Europos doesn't get many tourists. That might have something to do with the fact that it hasn't been occupied since the middle of the second century A. D. That's when the Romans gave up trying to maintain a fortress there and the next army to occupy the area ran everyone out of town.

After Dura-Europos was abandoned in 257, the desert sand covered it up and that was that. Then, in early 1900's some French and American archeologists arrived and started digging. They unearthed some amazing things. The walls of the ancient city. An amphitheater built by the Romans. Even a lavishly decorated synagogue.<sup>1</sup>

These archeologists also unearthed the oldest known building used for Christian worship in all the world. It's not a cathedral or a basilica. It wasn't even built to be church to begin with. It's just an ordinary domestic house which was converted to accommodate a community of Christians who worshipped there in Dura-Europos some 1,860 years ago.

What did the archeologists find? Pretty much what you'd expect to find in a church. There was a meeting room where people could gather to read the scriptures, pray, and celebrate the Lord's Supper. There was another room, a little smaller, where teaching took place. (I suppose you could call it the Sunday School room.)

And the house church in Dura-Europos had a little room just off the courtyard where baptisms were enacted. There's a recess in the wall with a tiled pool about the size of a modern bathtub. It's not deep enough for immersion, but there's enough room for the person being baptized to kneel while water was poured over the person's head in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Imagine you were the person kneeling in that little baptistry in Dura-Europos almost two thousand years ago. You're about to be baptized, but before the water hits your head and the presider marks you as a child of God, you can look up on the wall just above that

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<sup>1</sup> It is likely that the ruins of Dura-Europos no longer exist, having been destroyed by ISIS. The frescoes are now housed at Yale University.

baptismal pool and see the art that some fellow believer has created to remind you why you're there.

The frescos on that ancient wall depict scenes from the Gospels. Back in the 250's the colors would have been vivid but by the time the church was discovered, they were a bit faded.

However, if you look closely, you can still make out several of the scenes. One depicts the disciples in a boat with Jesus walking on the water, reaching out to Peter to keep him from drowning. Another shows a man lying on a bed next to a drawing of the same man bearing his bed on his back and walking away. Clearly, the artist is telling the story of the healing of the paralytic.

But by far the most distinct image on that stucco wall just above the place where those early followers of Jesus passed through the waters is the depiction of the first parable in today's reading from the Gospel of Luke.

There he is, up on the wall, the shepherd who has left the 99 in search of the one lost sheep. He's got the sheep on his back and he's bringing it home – home to invite his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him – home to the party, home to the celebration for the one who was lost but now is found.

It's not hard to imagine that brother or sister gazing on that image and thinking, as the water pours down, "That's me! I'm that lost sheep. I'm the sinner God has been seeking. But now I'm found, and as soon as I get up out of this pool and put on my baptism gown, I'm going to go over to the assembly room where a table is laid and my brothers and sisters in Christ are waiting to celebrate."

*Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,  
But yet in love he sought me.  
And on his shoulders gently laid  
and home rejoicing brought me.*

Christians have been singing some version of that song for a very, very long time. They were singing it when a group of Syrian Christians converted that little house in Dura-Europos into a place for Christian worship. The artist who painted that fresco in the wet plaster of the walls of the baptistry was singing it, too – perhaps in Hebrew or Aramaic. And even before anybody thought of "church" in the sense of a designated building for worship, Christians were putting themselves in that story we just heard, told by Jesus to religious experts who took a dim view of the company Jesus was keeping.

If you can imagine what it was like to be in that little house church, I'll bet you can imagine the Pharisees and scribes grumbling about Jesus.

*Look at him. They say he's a prophet, a man of God. They say he's telling people to look for the kingdom of God to arrive at any moment. He's even hinting the kingdom is already here. But there he is, in the houses of sinners and tax collectors, eating with them. Drinking with them. Associating with the scum of the earth. Doesn't he know that you're judged by the company you keep?*

*If Jesus were a true prophet, he'd have those people on their knees, confessing their sins. He'd give an altar call and have them come down the aisle while the rest of us sing, "Just as I Am." If Jesus were really the Messiah, he wouldn't waste time on these nobodies.*

A meal back in Jesus' day was more than a way to fill your stomach. It had sacred associations. To invite someone to a meal was to invite them into intimate relationship. You ate out of the same bowl, drank out of the same cup, shared the same loaf. Then, at the end of the meal, you prayed to the same God. To be a dinner guest was to partake in the holy. You can't take chances with that.

It's no wonder, then, that Jesus' meal-time habits caused such a ruckus. Not only did he accept dinner invitations from tax collectors and various other sinners, he himself seems to have played host to them.

*This man -- this supposedly holy man -- welcomes sinners and tax collectors to his own table and eats with them. And we're supposed to listen to him?*

The scribes and Pharisees have a point. Would you listen to a preacher who's having an affair with a church member? Would you listen to a presidential candidate caught on video bragging about assaulting women? Would you listen to a rabbi who breaks bread with riffraff and bloodsuckers? Of course not! We religious people have a certain standard to maintain.

Jesus overhears the grumbling and in response tells three stories.

The first story is about a shepherd with a flock of 100 sheep. When he counts them at the end of the day, he discovers one is missing. So what does he do? He leaves the 99 to fend for themselves in the wilderness, and searches for the lost sheep until he finds it. When he does, he lays it on his shoulders, and carries it home, rejoicing all the way. When

he gets home, he calls all his friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me. I have found my one lost sheep. Isn’t that fantastic news!”

Clearly, this is a shepherd who has been out in the sun too long. What shepherd leaves 99 sheep in the wilderness just to find one lost sheep? I ask you, is that prudent? Is it responsible? Is it cost efficient?

**“Which one of you would not do the same?”** Jesus wants to know. Well, none of us would do the same. We’re not that crazy.

If that’s the case, Jesus implies, you don’t understand how the kingdom of God works. **“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.”**

Then Jesus tells a female version of the same story.

A woman has ten silver coins. That’s ten days’ worth of wages for a day laborer – not a trifling amount. She loses one coin. What does she do?

Stand back, brothers and sisters, it’s spring cleaning time now. She hauls the furniture out into the yard. She shakes out the rush matting on the floor. She looks into every pot and cooking vessel. She even checks the “job jar” her husband hasn’t opened in six months.

It takes a lot of hunting, but she finds that coin. And when she does, she calls together all her friends and neighbors and invites them to rejoice, too. “Look at this! I found my coin! Rejoice with me!”

Surely, even if we’re still scratching our heads about that shepherd, we can picture this woman’s joy. I’m still looking for the silver cross Andra gave me for my ordination. I lost it 33 years ago, but when I find it, I’m going to rejoice like nobody’s business.

Well, says Jesus, that’s the scene in heaven when one sinner repents, when a single person who’s in the “out crowd” is brought into the “in crowd” of God’s embrace.

Jesus mentions repentance, but I’d like you to notice something about these stories. Sheep don’t repent, do they? They do get lost, however, and have to be found by a shepherd who drops everything to search for them. Coins don’t repent, do they? They do get lost, however, and have to be found by the person who turns her whole house upside down until she sees it, glinting in some forgotten crevice.

These aren't *repentance* stories so much as they are *hunting* stories. And they're less *hunting* stories than they are *party* stories. In the end, they're about *rejoicing* – as at a wedding feast, or a banquet, or an ordinary meal where every place is filled, and no one is left out.

**“People will come,”** said Jesus, **“from east and west, from north and south, to sit at table in the kingdom”** (Luke 13:29). The meals Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors point toward that kingdom. They are *sacramental* in the same way the meal he shared with his disciples in that Upper Room the night before he died was sacramental.

We call this sacrament “The Lord’s Supper” because Jesus is the host, and because, when we eat and drink, we remember him. But this meal is more than a re-enactment of the Last Supper. It’s a recalling of all those other meals that Jesus hosted – to which he invited scribes and Pharisees, sinners and tax collectors, rich and poor.

Now, if you don’t like these stories, then obviously you have never felt lost. You’ve never been the one cut off from the ninety-nine, wandering in the wilderness as the sun goes down. You’ve never been hungry for the bread of acceptance.

There are some Christians who insist that the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about what we must do to get a seat at the table. We must make say the right creed, make the right confession, join the right church, hate the right enemy. That doesn’t sound like gospel to me.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is about God’s longing to begin the banquet and God’s hunt for those who haven’t yet been seated at their place at the table. Someday, the gospel says, all the sheep and all the coins will be found, all the nobodies will be somebodies, and even the scribes and Pharisees will rejoice with the angels of heaven.

And why not? Because God is God, there is more than enough for everyone.