

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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In today's gospel, we heard the Pharisees complaining about Jesus's leadership style. Remember, the Pharisees were religious leaders that had devoted themselves to a literal, conservative, and unchanging view of the Jewish Laws. They worked to follow over 600 Jewish laws, and these laws shaped their understanding of God and the world. From their perspective, they were doing God's work by following these rules. So, when Jesus started fraternizing with those who didn't follow these Jewish laws, they did what self-righteous religious people often do, they grumble.

They probably grumbled that the "sinners" were lazy. They likely argued that "those people" are undeserving. They tried to justify why their complaining was righteous. In the end, they sought to maintain the status quo, a separation of people, and a fractured community.

Yet, Jesus's response to the grumble was to invoke empathy. He offered two parables and invited the Pharisees to imagine themselves in another's shoes. One parable was from the view of a masculine sheep owner and the other from a woman losing a coin. Both lost, both sought, both found, and both were joyful. Both were equated with God—one a masculine version of God and the other a feminine manifestation. And at the same time, Jesus argued that both performed a reasonable action that anyone in would have done. Anyone who loses something valuable would seek it, and after finding it, the only response is to joy. In this gospel,

we are invited to see ourselves in various stances. We're invited to imagine the times in our lives where we are that grumbling religious leaders; those times when we focus more on being right than being in relationship. We're invited to imagine what it's like to seek out restored relationships with intention and persistence, as one who would search for something of great value. So too, we find ourselves in the place of being the repentant one returning to the community. // That's often how parables work. They invite us to look at multiple angles of a story and then, see ourselves in each position. It's ultimately an act of empathy, it's a desire to better reveal relationship, and it's the gift that God offers us.

After worship, we will assemble our bags of love which will help empower us to give and receive empathy. It's easy for us to grumble as someone approaches our car, or sleeps on a bus or a train, or sits at the same spot each day asking for food and money. It's the Pharisee within us that grumbles as we think they should just get a job or that they have what they deserve. Yet, in today's reading Jesus invites us not to walk away from those we perceive on the outside, but instead, to engage, share, and learn.

That is why we will put together bags with food, resources, support, and cards of love. Then you are prepared to live out the gospel, literally. To share in a conversation with someone you see often but that you might pass by. To begin to see that human as a beloved child of God, to recognize them as a valuable sibling in the fabric of humanity, and to help restore the dignity that our God bestows on all people. There's no doubting that a small bag will not fully restore that relationship, but perhaps, it's just the beginning. Maybe you'll learn that the

woman sleeping on the train was the victim of domestic violence and the crime of arson took all that she owned. Or, perhaps you'll meet Chuck who lives on the street after getting injured at work that led to medical debt swallowing the life he led. In sharing that bag, the hope is that it'll be the beginning of a journey toward restoration. A small act that blooms into the full celebration of joy. The first step toward seeing all of humanity and all of creation with empathy and compassion.

That's part of the reason we gather here at this table each week. It's a meal that we share together. Each person is offered the same gifts of the table. The lawyer eats with the criminal. The doctor shares a table with the patient. The worker dines with the employer. The undocumented immigrant shares the same meal with the citizen. Together, straight and queer folk get to know each other. Here, people of color and white individuals embrace a shared experience. It is here, at this table, that we are reminded of God's vision that all may gather in joy. An opportunity to see the other with empathy. To acknowledge that we are all on the same journey in life—a journey towards relationship, a journey towards love, and a journey towards God's gift of life.

So, friends, as we continue in worship today, let us give thanks to God for the gift of empathy. Let us recall our God who goes to the extreme to seek, include, and reconcile all creation. Our God who shows us what love looks like, what joy looks like, and what an abundance of life really means. Then, we are given the opportunity to restore relationship, share love, and celebrate in the joyful restoration of all. Amen.