

This is probably a very dangerous story for me to tell. When I was in seminary, I was a Denver Broncos fan. You'll have to forgive me. I grew up in Colorado, and had spent four years in Oklahoma, where there is no professional football team, so, when I moved to Wisconsin for seminary, I remained a Broncos fan.

It was the evening of January 25, 1998, and the Broncos were playing the Green Bay Packers in Super Bowl 32. I did not have a television, so a friend and I went to a local sports bar to watch the game. I wasn't terribly afraid to wear an orange shirt, because this was the Super Bowl. Denver had been to four of them, and lost all four.

When the game was almost over, and it became clear that the Broncos were about to win, I started to get some angry looks. Then I got a couple of angry comments. I asked the waitress if there was an entrance a little closer to my car, so I could make a quick escape. She said, "You walked in here dressed like that. You'll have to walk out of here dressed like that."

I learned something very important on January 25, 1998. It can be dangerous to celebrate the wrong thing. I can assure you that I will celebrate when the Cleveland Browns win the Super Bowl.

So, when Jesus welcomed the tax collectors and sinners, and ate with them, the Pharisees and the Scribes grumbled. Sharing a meal with someone was not simply for the sake of nourishment. When you invited guests to eat with you, it would almost always have a celebratory atmosphere. The Pharisees and Scribes were upset because Jesus was celebrating with the wrong people.

In our minds we tend to paint a portrait of the Scribes and Pharisees that is not entirely accurate. If you call someone a Pharisee, it never has a positive connotation. You are saying they are rule bound, judgmental, hypocritical, and quite often just plain mean. We tend to think that their religious practice was purely for show, that it was all about outward things, and had nothing to do with their hearts.

The truth is the Scribes and Pharisees were trying to do what they thought was right. God had given the law to the Jewish people. Obedience to the law was the way they were seeking divine favor. After all, it was Israel's disobedience to the law that had brought about the destruction of the first temple and their captivity in Babylon. They were the ones trying to make sure that did not happen again.

When they saw Jesus, a man who many regarded as a prophet of God, welcoming law breakers, they worried that it would send the wrong message. People might think collaborating with Gentiles was not a serious thing. People might think that sin didn't really matter. They might think that the law was not all that important. They might not take holiness seriously.

Sometimes God's people still suffer from this mentality. We're worried that if we preach radical grace people won't understand that sin truly is a serious matter that brings all kinds of destruction to their lives, and the lives of those around them. We're worried that if we don't make people tow the line, they will never be transformed. We worry that if we let people in before they've cleaned up their lives, they might never get cleaned up.

Jesus answered the Scribes' and Pharisees' grumbling with three parables. We only read two of them today. The third is the Parable of the Prodigal. Jesus began his response with the Parable of Finding the Lost Sheep. He said, "If you lose a sheep, and you go out looking for it, when you finally find it, what is your response? Of course, you celebrate the one that you found." He then went on with the Parable of Finding the Lost Coin. "What woman who loses a coin, and diligently searches for it would not celebrate when she found it?"

Jesus explained why he was celebrating with sinners and tax collectors. He said there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who need no repentance. By the way, the ninety-nine or even the nine who need no repentance is what is known in the field of Mathematics as an empty set. They don't exist.

Jesus was saying, "If you could see the celebration that is taking place in heaven over these sinners and tax collectors who are coming to me, you would join in this celebration." We might want to keep this in mind when we pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." If we could really see heaven and the celebration going on there over every person who is found by Jesus, we might celebrate that with more joy than we did when the Cavaliers won the championship.

Jesus was also redefining what repentance really means. The Scribes and Pharisees had a definition of repentance that included things like making amends, both to God and to anyone you had injured. It included a demonstrable change in behavior, and an acknowledgment that you had been wrong. Jesus defined repentance as allowing ourselves to be found by him.

When the sinners and the tax collectors received his invitation, that was repentance. It meant that they were turning toward him. That was the act of repentance. If the Scribes and the Pharisees wanted to repent, they too needed to allow him to find them. They needed to receive the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven. They needed to acknowledge that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, and stop resisting the grace he offered to the world.

I'm sure some of the Scribes and Pharisees wondered what would become of the law if they celebrated with Jesus, if they joined in eating with tax collectors and sinners. How would holiness be upheld?

The truth is, no one who is found by Jesus remains the same. When we accept the invitation to come to his table, we will change. It may not happen as quickly as we would like. It almost never happens as quickly as the Scribes and Pharisees would like. It is impossible for us to accept the invitation of Jesus and remain the same.

That's the good news in these two parables. You have caused a celebration in the Kingdom of Heaven. When you accepted Jesus' invitation to come to his table, there was rejoicing in the presence of the Angels of God. Sometimes we forget that. Sometimes we feel like God merely tolerates our existence in His Kingdom. Sometimes we feel like our transformation must be too slow to really be pleasing to God. If you have felt like that, hear the words of Jesus again. There is rejoicing in the presence of the Angels of God over one sinner who repents. When we come to

this table today, accepting the invitation of Jesus, there is rejoicing in Heaven, because we, who were lost, have been found.