

SERMON
September 15, 2007
Proper 19C
“Grumbling vs. rejoicing”

How do you soften a hardened heart?

How do you help a rigid person loosen up and become more flexible?

In today’s Gospel lesson, we hear a story about how Jesus does that.

In the Gospel story, it says that the Pharisees and scribes are grumbling.

Now the Pharisees and scribes, we know, are pretty rigid people.

They have their standards about what’s proper and nice

and they know that the people that Jesus is seeing are not nice people.

“This fellow welcomes tax collectors and sinners and eats with them,”
is what they’re grumbling about.

Now grumbling is an interesting word

to describe what the Pharisees and scribes are doing.

Grumbling means that they’re muttering to each other

behind the backs of their hands;

they’re surreptitiously complaining to each other.

It’s not outright criticism of Jesus;

it’s not out in the open,

but it’s the worst kind – grumbling.

You remember that word from earlier in the Bible.

When Moses was leading the people of Israel

through the wilderness for forty years,

the people grumbled about Moses.

They grumbled behind his back

and the grumbling festered and chafed

until finally it smoldered into open rebellion.

Grumbling is what we do when we’re not really being honest.

I catch myself doing it

when I want to justify my own irritation with someone or something.

It’s my way of rubbing my hands over the little flame of my anger.

It's my way of cherishing
my own jealousy and discontent and keeping it alive.

So the Pharisees and the scribes were just being human
when they grumbled about Jesus.

They were being just like you and me.

“This fellow welcomes tax collectors and sinners and eats with them.”

So what does Jesus do with these hard-hearted grumblers?

Does he confront them with their own rigidity
and order them to be more open-minded?

No. That never works.

You can't soften a rigid person by throwing something hard at them.

You have to find an opening of some kind
where you can get through to them.

What Jesus does is, he tells them two parables.

And each of the parables ends the same way, with rejoicing.

In the first parable, he says,

“Which of you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them
does not immediately leave the ninety nine
and go out searching for the one that is lost?

And when you find it,

don't you lay it on your shoulders and come home rejoicing?

And don't you go out and call your neighbors and say,

‘Come rejoice with me, for I've found my lost sheep?’”

And in the second parable, Jesus says,

“What woman, if she loses one of her ten coins,
does not light a lamp and sweep her house
and search till she finds it and then call her neighbors, saying,
‘Rejoice with me, for I've found the coin I lost.’”

What Jesus is doing is offering them an alternative to their grumbling.

“You may be grumbling over these tax collectors and sinners,
but look what God is doing.

There's more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents

than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

The alternative to grumbling is joy.

Now I don't know how the Pharisees and scribes are going to take this.
 Maybe they'll be offended by what Jesus says.

But I sort of think that maybe some of those Pharisees and scribes
 might just get the message in spite of all their armor.

Jesus says, “There's more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents
 than over ninety-nine who need no repentance.”

If there's joy in heaven, don't you think you'd like to be part of that?
 Even a crusty old Pharisee might see the benefit in that.

What I think these two parables do is find a vulnerable spot
 in the hearts of the Pharisees and scribes.

If you have a choice between grumbling and rejoicing,
 wouldn't you want to choose the joy?
 Even if the grumbling feels good, the joy is really much better.

I think these parables are an ingenious way
 for Jesus to show hard-hearted people that God loves them.
 And not only that, God loves every child of earth,
 and even rejoices over them.

And if God loves every human being
 and rejoices over every human person,
 then why can't we do the same?

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes,
 “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.”
 Only a hard-hearted person would refuse to rejoice
 with someone else when they're rejoicing,
 but we do it all the time.

But God rejoices in us.
 Why can't we rejoice with others?

I recently saw a short video of Archbishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa.
 Archbishop Tutu has what has to be called an angelic smile.

He's just a little wrinkled black man,
but his smile is a mile wide.
It just lights everything up.

And in this video, he was preaching from a pulpit,
and he opened up his arms and said,
"Jesus said, 'When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.'
Not some people.
All. All. All."

And Desmond Tutu's smile and his heart were as big as God's heart, I think.
He just showed God's love so clearly,
the love of God for every human being.

So when you feel like grumbling,
and when your anger is taking charge of you,
think about how God loves every human being.
Think about how God loves you and wants to rejoice with you.

Even a Pharisee's heart is capable of change.