

Jesus wanted everyone to know that they counted with God. Jeremiah was warning his people that God grieved over the avoidance of God's Law, and would send destruction because of their pulling away from God's will. Paul is assuring his audience of God's mercy available to all and God's desire to claim everyone.

Most of us grew up with an expectation of "getting ahead" in life. That meant acquiring education or training for a particular job or profession. It meant becoming established in a community and participating with others in social groups. Often, there was division and separation. Everyone did not have the same opportunities even though we wanted to believe that everyone did. Yet people were able to learn how to function and make a contribution. We were satisfied.

As we look at our Scriptures for this day we become aware that those are age-old expectations and conditions. We realize that they are true today even though our lifestyle has radically changed. One cannot expect to remain in the same work and community for a lifetime. We still struggle with the issues of belonging and separation, wherever we are. There are still the outcast and marginalized.

Jesus is speaking to the ages as he tells these stories. Jesus is instructing the people that everyone is important and necessary to God from the very beginning of time. The "lost sheep" of our time are still loved and cared for by God. They continue to have gifts to share in this community or others. Jesus urges us to discover ways to include them in, rather than simply let them go their own way.

The parable of the lost coin is about more than persistence. It is about recognizing things of value our native abilities and gifts - however small they may be. Often I hear people who are sorting through their possessions in preparation to relocate to smaller dwellings speak of things they hold dear, though they have little financial value. Many of us wonder what to do with lovely things we have enjoyed that our children have no interest in accepting as their own. Still others experience a disinterest in the abilities they have to offer and feel abandoned or left out.

All of these Scriptures are about turning to God; recognizing God's claim on us as Creator and maker of all that we are. They are about turning away from preoccupation with the things of this world; giving up the "things happen" attitude that becomes an excuse for not walking the extra mile or offering the cup of cold water; or allow us to set aside our desire to share our special knowledge or gift. They call us to repentance. That is, they ask us to examine our practice of faith without making excuses for what we don't do or judging what others do.

Repentance taking responsibility for our behavior. It is coming to terms with our brokenness - recognizing our own failures. It is accepting that we are not perfect, that we make mistakes, that we tend to think of ourselves first. Repentance is turning to God for new direction, seeking God's will for every aspect of our lives.

That's not very inviting. We prefer to be in charge ourselves. We like to think that our ideas and practices are more than adequate. We want others to look to us for example and direction. That leads us to a close look at the reading from 1 Timothy.

This reading present Paul as a person of humility. Often we think of Paul as speaking with authority, presenting the inside word. Whether this is precisely Paul or a person writing as a disciple of Paul, is not essential here. This is a confession. Paul, when he was known as Saul had tortured and tried to destroy the young Christian community. He was on his way to do more damage when he had a very personal encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. His life was changed forever. He was challenged that day precisely in terms of his cruel behavior: "Why do you persecute me?"

Paul had no idea he was persecuting Jesus. He was wearing his Pharisee hat and working very hard to be sure his people, Israel, would follow the Law of Moses, given to them in a previous generation. He was just doing his job! Paul believed he was obeying the Law. Jesus was becoming recognized as a great teacher and attracting crowds. Often they included the wrong people - the tax collectors and people known to sin. How could that be an example of faithfulness?! His obsession with keeping the Law made him blind to the deeper, more far-reaching purpose of the Law. Suddenly he was introduced to new dimensions of that Law.

Jesus used parables to teach the people that they are important; that they are essential to God and God's intent for the maintenance of the creation. Jesus is calling the people to inclusion; to welcoming those they have cast aside or allowed to go astray.

in our present day we experience brokenness in many ways. We are most aware of broken relationships through disagreement, divorce, loss of employment, or relocation. Often we fail to see that our candid expression of what we think or feel has shut another down and rendered that person unable to make a similar expression. They pull away, unable to express personal experience and feelings. Conversely sometimes we are the ones who feel pushed away and find ourselves crawling into a shell and doing only what is absolutely necessary.

We could curl up in shame or disappointment. We could turn our backs on the world and all the things that disturb us. This is where the words of 1 Timothy speak to us. Paul was confronted with his behavior that went totally against God's will. He can hardly believe God was reaching out to him and calling him to a new practice of ministry. Paul's words here call to us loudly: "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners". In Jesus Christ we are forgiven! That is the good news of our faith. The message we have to share is of forgiveness, mercy and love.

Paul experienced the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. We are called to join our biblical models and engage in the practice of forgiveness; reaching out to all who need to hear those words of acceptance and reconciliation. We are urged to reach out to the lost; those who have pulled away, those who have strayed due to other conditions. We are called to admit our own fault or sin and seek forgiveness and even more important reconciliation. We are called to experience the joy of finding and being found and building up the kingdom of God.

Next Sunday we are going to take another step in our faith journey. We will worship as usual, emphasizing and greater period of prayer and reflection seeking that reconciliation. We seek to build up the sense of community and belonging so long a characteristic of the congregation.

May the experience we share lead to celebration of a new fullness of life in this congregation and inspire us to reach out to our friends and neighbors with the joy of sharing in this community of faith.