

**Erratic**

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**Luke 15:1-10**

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For over twenty years, Will Willimon was the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, and held forth in that coveted role as a much sought after and much quoted preacher and had the privilege of teaching on a beautiful gothic campus interacting with and getting to be chaplain to the next generation of America's elite, surrounded by a world class faculty, and high achievers of all sorts. Probably at the apex of his career in that position, Willimon left to become a United Methodist Bishop in Birmingham, Alabama, where he served as bishop for nearly a decade. When asked about the biggest difference or change in those two roles, he didn't talk about the differences in cultural comportment or barbecue or even college football teams, but when asked about what he missed about his time at Duke, here is what he said: "I miss the Duke Admissions Office. I miss the Admissions Office because, through their efforts, it was guaranteed that on every day of my time at Duke and at every hour of each day, I would be able to interact with and be in conversation with people who thought just like me." Sure, they might be racially diverse or politically diverse or internationally diverse, but they were all high achievers who valued success and believed they would attain significant amounts of prominence, wealth, and notoriety in the world. 'I miss the Duke Admissions Office,' Willimon said with tongue in cheek, "In North Alabama, churches are not permitted to have an admissions office, and we have to work, with whomever Jesus drags to church." At our best, even if it seems chaotic and dysfunctional, Christian communities that function without an admissions office and are happy to work with whomever God puts in our midst.

That seems to be the accusation leveled at Jesus here in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter at Luke which kicks off what I must say is the central pivot point of all of Luke's gospel. I believe Reformer Martin Luther referred to this chapter in Luke as the gospel in a nutshell, and much of the chapter is given over to the parable of the prodigal son, but I think it is interesting to take note of how it all begins, not with a majestic gesture or a fancy introduction, but with a complaint from the admissions office. Actually, it begins not with anything articulate or put into words at all, but with grumbling. Then the grumbling takes verbal form in a complaint from the office of Pharisee admissions. This week I happened on a passage from George MacDonald, the founder of the Iona Community. What jarred me was that he went out on a limb and made the case that there are two unforgiveable sins and weirdly both have to do with forgiveness...the first MacDonald says is a stubborn unwillingness to receive forgiveness from God and the second is the unwillingness to extend forgiveness to our neighbor. MacDonald writes these jarring words: 'It may be infinitely less evil to murder someone than to refuse to forgive them.'

The former may be the act of a moment of passion; the latter is the heart's choice. It is *spiritual murder*, the worst, to hate, to brood over the feeling that excludes, that kills the image, the idea of the hated.<sup>1</sup> To brood over the feeling that excludes. To grumble. To dismantle someone, in this case Jesus, because of the company he keeps. My first job upon graduation from college was as a very green and inexperienced high school teacher and coach. I remember early in that endeavor hanging around some of my colleagues at the end of the day and our boss and head of our division walking past and saying 'remember, you are known by the company you keep.' What did he mean, I thought. What does this guy know about me? Does this guy think I'm hanging around the wrong people? Am I about to get fired? Not only do the Pharisees operate with the understanding that Jesus is known by the company that he keeps, but that his behavior, practice, and chosen company are suspect. He is not hanging around reputable people. Our passage begins not with excitement or some inner deliberations or even puzzlement, but our passage begins with a grumble. A guttural sound that signals disapproval, disappointment, disdain, dis-ease, and a general sense that Jesus can do better and probably needs an admissions committee to help him sort through all the rabble. After the grumbling finally gives way to some tsk-tsking, the Pharisees verbalize their grumbling and say as they condescendingly shake their heads, this guy 'welcomes sinners and eats with them.' I don't know if that are upset that Jesus has no standards, or that Jesus is willing to welcome anyone, or that Jesus specifically welcomes people they do not think are worthy of God's love and favor.

There was a guy in the church I grew up in who got active and interested in the church and was an enthusiastic member of the church who I believe was an auto-mechanic by training. At some point in the church's life, he had a big idea and believed really strongly that on Christmas day the church should open its doors for lunch, on that day of all days, to anybody in the community who might want a homecooked meal in the company of others and in the warmth of fellowship and sharing in each other's lives. And so reluctantly, the church agreed to let this guy run with his idea, but I don't think too many folks changed their Christmas lunch plans to attend his gathering and join him in this odd undertaking. And I don't know if what unfolded is exactly what he envisioned, but the people who showed up weren't just one segment of the community population. There were people from within the church who did not have family in town or who didn't feel like eating at home by themselves, and thought what the heck, let's go, so they came. There were people who were afraid the church might get messed up if they didn't come, so they came. At my table, there was a couple passing through town who told me that they had gotten into some legal trouble in Illinois and were on their way to somewhere else America looking for a new start. There were also members of the local homeless

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<sup>1</sup> George MacDonald, from *Creation in Christ*, in *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants*, 279.

population, probably dealing with some form of mental health and addiction or all of the above, but came for some food, a warm meal, a place to go for Christmas. I think about that Christmas meal and how it had no admissions committee, and also that the guy that spearheaded the whole thing ended up going back to school and getting his college degree, attending seminary, and deciding to become a Presbyterian minister. I don't know if the twists and turns of life and ministry have turned out exactly as he envisioned, or if his vision of the Christmas lunch is the main thing that propelled him into ministry in the first place, but I certainly remember going to that event myself grumbling and leaving thinking I had been given a glimpse of the kingdom of God. God does stuff like that to us all the time.

The church has to work with whoever Jesus drags in the door. Sometimes that can make us grumble and even feel like a liability. Wouldn't it be nice to have an admissions office, to be a highly selective community of faith, to create an application or a filter to get those more bent to our liking. But to do so is to risk losing our very identity. I had the opportunity to work in a congregation in Scotland and while I was there the church hired an office manager who had spent the majority of his career in the Royal Navy and who was constantly surprised at the notion that the way of life that unfolded in the organized chaos of Christian community did not happen with the same military precision as a nuclear submarine where he spent most of his career. One day in some moment of frustration or puzzlement, he looked at me and said, 'we are living hand-to-mouth here.' And he was exactly right. At our best, we are still living hand to mouth, waiting for God's grace to captivate us, inspire us, and set us on another path, often without adequate preparation or foresight. We get to work with whomever God drags in the door and we often find that they have more to teach us than if we had hold of the reigns. And perhaps that is what shines through this passage as Jesus sees the perceived weakness of the company that he keeps as a joyful opportunity to be embraced rather than a collection of people to grumble about. To illustrate his point, Jesus tells the parable of the Lost Sheep and asks a very puzzling question. 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it.' Um, is that a trick question, because I'm sticking with the ninety-nine. I am no insurance expert, but I know enough about risk management to know that to leave 99 in the wilderness to go find one lost wayward creature is going to put the other 99 at risk. Cut losses. Stand pat. Don't do anything erratic. In New Testament commentator Robert Capon's words, 'this parable can hardly be interpreted as a helpful hint for running a successful sheep-ranching business. The most likely result of going off in pursuit of one lost sheep will only be ninety-nine more lost sheep.'<sup>2</sup> Capon believes that the erratic Good Shepherd's whole point is that 'he is first and foremost in the

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Capon, *Parables of Kingdom, Grace, & Judgment*, 185.

business of finding the lost, not making a messianic buck off the unstrayed,' and given time those other 99 will get lost anyway, and the Good Shepherd will come and find them, one by one, and welcome them back home. And not just bringing us back to a state of not being lost, but as Jesus paints here, the Shepherd lays it on his shoulders and rejoices and calls his friends and neighbors to a celebration for 'I have found my lost sheep.' When God gets involved, our grumbling miraculously is turned into our redemption and lostness or waywardness or any feeling of worthiness are attractive features to the Shepherd who comes for the lost. As Robert Capon reminds us, 'these stories, therefore, are parables of grace' and in them there is 'not one single note of earning or merit, not one breath about rewarding the rewardable, correcting the correctible, or improving the improvable,' only this erratic determination to release captives, exalt the lowly, and find the lost, even at the risk of jeopardizing the 99 who thought they could achieve their way to a sufficient level of moral and spiritual improvement all on their own.<sup>3</sup> This is a story, Jesus is saying, about a God who is determined to move before we do, and that the challenge before us is not so much to acquire a set of acceptable religious skills or bring about God's kingdom as if it is all up to us, but to live in the world expecting to encounter the God who is determined to take our admission committee grumbling and turn it into laughter and celebration, even as the lost are pursued lovingly and erratically and room is miraculously found for the often ignored and no wilderness is too far and no depth no deep for those gone astray to be found, welcomed, and given a place at the table of celebration. over and over again throughout the gospels, this is what Jesus does, casting out demons or healing the sick or calling disciples or sitting at table with sinners and the ill repute and treating them all like children of God and exalting them as siblings in Christ. Over and over this is what Jesus does, and in our own lives, over and over again this is what God is determined to do with. Not letting our grumbling or our despair or our own lines in the sand be the last word, but rescuing us, often from ourselves and our attempts to stay unstrayed or from our attempts to keep up our appearances with the 99 or our attempts to engineer our own redemption all by ourselves. It means more likely than not, we are going to leave here and go get lost again, in a world of mechanical cause and effect, in a world that often feels fragmented and unfriendly, in a world where notions of God seem irrelevant, powerless, even quaint and absurd. That is going to happen. But according to Jesus, that is not the end of the story, because one way or another, the God who is determined to find the lost and exalt them, will once again find a way to re-enter our lives, exalt us and bring us back together, and turn our grumbling into shouts of celebration. That is also going to happen. So go get lost again so that God can be God. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Capon, 187.