***“God’s Party Time”***

**Psalm 51:1-10; Luke 15:1-10**

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Have you ever asked yourself the question: *Where is God?* It’s a question that is being asked with increasing urgency by millions of people around the world, but in recent decades many are finding and experiencing God outside of traditional religious institutions—and this has been disconcerting and confusing to those of us who value church, synagogue, and mosque.

Diana Butler Bass, church historian and theologian, writes beautifully about this global phenomenon in her 2015 book, *Grounded: Finding God in the World, A Spiritual Revolution,* where she brings theology *back down to earth* and convincingly argues that what appears to be decline (in traditional religious institutions) actually signals a major transformation in how people understand and experience God. And (I think) she is right.

For example, the distant God of conventional religion has given way to a more intimate sense of the sacred that saturates the world. This shift from a *vertical* God to a God found on the horizons of nature and human community, is the heart of a spiritual revolution that surrounds us—and that is challenging not only religious institutions but political and social ones as well.

Butler Bass calls this *sacred cosmopolitanism*—an awareness of the connections we share with God and others *here on earth.* Of course, in certain ways, this awareness has always been with us. In the past, this understanding has embodied humankind’s greatest aspirations, and it has guided artists, prophets, gurus, mystics, and saints through the ages.

But what was once the vision of only a *few* has now become a theological revolution of *many.* It is an understanding and experience of God that goes *over* *boundaries:* the boundary that once divided Creator from creation, the boundary that divided nature from human community, the boundaries that divided human communities, and finally the boundary that divided God from humankind.

So, instead of living inside of *tight religious boxes*, many people are experiencing a *borderless kind of spiritual awareness* that has enabled them to find God in the *world of nature* and in the *geography of human life.* And part of the boundary crossing involves going beyond *religious boundaries* as well as *ethnic and national ones.* And the recognition of the *sacred cosmopolitan*—that we are citizens with God and one another in a holy cosmos together—is found among people of all faith traditions.

This does not mean, however, that all religions are alike or that we shall be happily forming a single world *“church”* anytime soon. Indeed, the sacred cosmopolitanism of nature and neighborliness might also be described as *humane localism,* a way of life in a worldwide web that cherishes the distinctiveness of our particular traditions and cultures while embracing the universal aspects of human community and the larger quest for God and meaning.

In other words, sacred cosmopolitanism is a *disposition* and an *inner awareness* that our individual lives and national identities are playing out on a vast global stage. And this implies *recognition* and a shift of perspective—of seeing and experiencing the web in which we live. Recognition, in turn, gives birth to *empathy* and the profound realization that we really, truly are *in this together.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

I share this with you because Rabbi Jesus was one of those prophets and mystics whose understanding and experience of God crossed boundaries, as well—and we see this in today’s text from Luke in the parables of the *lost sheep* and the *lost coin.*

But, first, some words of caution. The traditional way of reading these parables are as *allegories* for repentance and forgiveness. The problem is that this risks portraying the God of Christianity as more merciful and loving than the God of Judaism. Further, Amy Jill Levine and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, explain, such an allegorical reading would have been foreign to the original audience:

*That audience would not think that the man who lost his sheep, the woman who lost her coin,* or the father who lost his older son [in the parable of the Prodigal son that follows], *were symbols for God. This is because God doesn’t lose us. Nor would they think of the sheep and the coin as examples of repenting, because sheep and coins don’t repent. In our reading, the stories are connected. The first two stories set up the third. The main message is about counting, searching for what is missing, and celebrating [throwing a party for] becoming whole again.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

This creates an *expansive vision* in which *everybody counts.* From sheep to coins to human beings, the message is that *it’s worth searching for those who are lost.*

For example, after carrying the exhausted lost sheep home on his shoulders, the man smiles and comments, *“One sheep makes a difference. Without her, something is missing. Now my flock is complete.”* Similarly, when the prodigal son’s father realizes that he has *“discounted”* his older son, he says, *“I love you”* and asks him to join the party. *“Without you,”* he admits*, “something is missing. With you, our family is complete.”*

In light of this, we may wonder today how history would have been different if Christians had consistently said those same words to their brothers and sisters of *every nationality, race, income bracket, and faith tradition*. *What if we were to live and work and vote and preach with the conviction that everybody counts?[[3]](#footnote-3)*

The late, great Marcus Borg, brings further clarity to these texts:

*“In the ancient Mediterranean world in general and the Jewish homeland, sharing a meal was a form of social inclusion, and refusing to share a meal was a form of social exclusion … For at least two groups, the Pharisees and Essenes, meal practice had become a symbol of what God wanted Israel to be. Both practiced ‘closed table fellowship’ grounded in an understanding of God’s command in Leviticus 19:2: ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.’ They understood holiness to mean purity.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

This realization is essential for understanding the strong criticism that Jesus’s meal practice drew. Several times the gospels report the criticism, consistently the same:

* *“Why does he eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (Mark 2:16)*
* *“He has gone in to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” (Luke 19:7)*
* *This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:2)*
* *“Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and Sinners! (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34)*

Within a Christian perspective that views *all* people as sinners, the accusation that Jesus eats with “sinners” brands the critics as hypocrites who exempt themselves from the category. But the term had not yet been theologized and universalized. Rather, like the term “tax collectors,” “sinners” referred to a group of people—namely, to people who were insufficiently observant from the vantage point of those making the accusation. What sinners and tax collectors had in common was that they were marginalized groups, with the “worst” of them seen as outcasts and untouchables. The accusation is that Jesus’s open table fellowship included people whose presence discredited him.

But the first century, boundary crossing, Rabbi Jesus, has an *expansive vision* in which *everybody counts.* From sheep to coins to human beings, the message is that *it’s worth searching for those who are lost.* The main message is about counting, searching for what is missing, and celebrating [throwing a party for] becoming whole again. We’re all in this together. Everybody is *in* and valued in God’s Kingdom*.[[5]](#footnote-5) [A kingdom that has more to do with this world than the next].*

I think this is interesting because Diana Butler Bass points out that the Bible begins with the *metaphors* of a perfect garden and ends with a sacred city. And that sacred city draws together nature and human community into an intimate relationship with God, the One who dwells in the midst of it all. *Here on earth.*

And earth is, of course, not as it used to be. More than seven billion people inhabit the planet, many of them in huge urban areas, now connected to one another through economics and technology. Neither nature nor humanity has ever been in this particular situation before. Philosophers, historians, and social scientists have begun to describe the twenty-first century world as “cosmopolitan,” meaning that all human beings are citizens of the world, that is “citizens of the cosmos.”

Boundaries have thinned between nations and cultures, and we participate in multiple worlds and our lives are simultaneously local and global. Today we are interdependent global tribes, people with different governments and faiths, yet who depend on one another in the same web of politics, economics, and technology. And religion.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Some call this globalization, but that is not quite the right word. As I mentioned earlier, cosmopolitanism is rather a disposition and an inner awareness that our individual lives and national identities are playing out on a vast global stage.

Even the book of Revelation describes a vision of diversity, of people from every tongue, tribe, and nation, who gather in the New Jerusalem. In the holy city, we maintain our uniqueness while God dwells in our midst. Unity is experienced in love and friendship, not doctrine or dogma. There is no coercion of faith.

And, interestingly, in the book of Revelation, a *throne* is at the center of the sacred city. In a hierarchical world, thrones are elevated chairs, the special places where kings or queens sit. But a throne is just a fancy chair. If asked to think of a room where there are chairs, most of us do not say, *“throne room.”* Most of us say, *“dining room.”*

Instead of thinking of Revelation’s sacred city as a sort of imperial throne room, perhaps we should see it as a dining room. And around the table are many chairs. The places are marked with cards: *“Christian,” “Jew,” “Muslim,” “Buddhist,” “American,” “Arab,” “Chinese,” “African,” “Human,” “Animal,” “Fish,” “Tree,”* and so on. No one owns the table. No one gets to take it over. We receive this table; it is the gift of heaven to earth. Our job is to pull up more chairs. And to make sure all are fed.

So, where is God? God hosts the table at the center of the world. The sacred cosmos is a feast, a *party* of host and guests, seated around the table that practices hospitality for all. The only requirement for joining is that you want to be there.[[7]](#footnote-7)

*Let us pray--*

1. Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the Word—A Spiritual Revolution,* Harper One, New York, 2015, pp. 270-272 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Elizabeth Palmer, *Everybody Counts: Even the Lollards,* The Christian Century, May 31, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, Harper San Francisco, 2006, pp. 159, 160 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the Word—A Spiritual Revolution,* Harper One, New York, 2015, pp.270, 271 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 272 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)