

Outer Circle Christians

“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Luke 15:2

When I was a kid I had a semi-harmless addiction to merry-go-rounds. It was always the first thing I ran to when unleashed on a playground. “Faster!” I shouted to whoever was willing to push as my face turned blue and my stomach queased. For me the game was resisting the increasing centrifugal force pushing outward by fighting my way to the center. I found it surreal that in the middle I could no longer feel the force pushing me outward. I’m sure there’s some science to it – something about Newton and a law he made up – but all I knew at the time was I had won the battle against the merry-go-round, usually at the price of near vomit.

The Spirit of Jesus compels us toward the outer edge of our spinning earth and away from the center of our own little world. He invites us to join him on his quest to heal a sick world. But we tend to isolate and insulate ourselves by moving closer to the center – into suburbs and other safe communities. As we fight his push outward, eventually the centrifugal force becomes imperceptible. In our cozy churches we tend to lose touch with the reality of the wider world and our sense of God’s compelling call outward. It leaves us deaf to the voice of God, insensitive to his impetus, and feeling sick to our stomachs.

The adventure is out on the edge where we’re suppose to engage with world around us. Sure, it’s dangerous out there and you might fall off and get hurt. But if you’re “sick” of Christianity and Church, maybe it’s because you’re sequestered in the middle instead of on the outer edge.

I have these pretty great friends that call themselves “The Outer Circle.” They’re urban missionaries among homeless hippie travellers in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park. They intentionally seek out and befriend people on society’s ragged edge. Their motto is to “invite the lonely, the outcast, and the wanderer into restoration of their entire beings by drawing them to Christ, giving them what they have, bringing them into community, and being their friends.” Most of their friends are drug addicts, slightly-to-severely mentally ill people, and socially awkward people that most church goers wouldn’t want to sit next to in their sterile pews. On Mondays I go with them to the park where we bring coffee and make pancakes on a camp stove in order to share our friendship with those who come out of the bushes, thus their name “Outer Circle.”

“The inner circle” is a common phrase people use to describe an elite few in a larger organization. Sometimes we use it for those closest to Jesus, the three disciples (Peter, James, and John) who were given special opportunities to be in the room when Jesus did extraordinary miracles. Evidently, he brought them into certain privileged circumstances because later he would call upon them for unique tasks.

On the other hand, it seems that Jesus spent a lot of energy trying to teach his “Inner Circle” to care about the “Outer Circle.” He wanted their circle to have a porous and penetrable perimeter in order to include castoffs. He didn’t want their inside sphere to become a barrier that would keep them away from those who needed him – and them – the most.

“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Luke 15:2

Jesus’ welcome was way too wide for the spiritual experts of his time. They didn’t like the people he welcomed, how they looked, where they were from, or how they worshipped. The Pharisees, Judaism’s self-appointed Inner Circle in Jesus’ day, weren’t interested in reaching Outer Circlers. They were way too busy judging them. It’s hard to give people a hand up and push down on them at

the same time. The restrictive spirituality of those who looked on the aimless and adrift with disdain sets the tone for the rest of the chapter and the three parables that Jesus told to expose it.

Jesus knew that Inner Circlers tend to become enamored with their special status and move furthest away from the most disoriented and least desirable. Remarkably, even John, the innermost of the Inner Circle got his circles confused at times. “We saw a man driving out demons in your name,” he told Jesus, “and we tried to stop him, because he wasn’t one of us!” Hmm, not really Outer Circle kind of talk. Later he and James – the brothers who wanted to sit at Jesus right and left in his kingdom – put in a request to call fire down on hated Samaritans. They reveled in Inner Circle status while neglecting their Outer Circle responsibility.

As the gospel of the Outer Circle, Luke has recently become favored territory for me. In his book he told more than the other three Jesus Bios about his interactions with **Samaritans** (9:51ff; 10:30ff; 17:11ff), with **pagans** (2:32; 3:6, 38; 4:25ff; 7:9; 10:1; 24:47), with **outcasts** (3:12; 5:27ff; 7:37ff; 19:2ff; 23:43), with **tax collectors**, with **lepers**, and with **women** (a woman’s status in the first century wasn’t any better, and often worse, than these others).

“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

He didn’t deny it or even try to justify his interaction with the least, last, and lost. Instead, he told three parables that show that he not only welcomes people on the fringe, but goes out of his way to seek them out, and when he finds them he throws a party!

The parables are all about lost things: *a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son*. A shepherd lost a sheep, he looked for it, found it, lifted it on his shoulders, carried it home, and threw a party. When a woman misplaced a valuable coin, she lit a lamp, furiously swept out every corner of her house, found it, and called her friends over to celebrate. A father’s youngest son leaves home, wastes his inheritance with out of control living, in desperation returned home where his father, much to his oldest son’s displeasure, was waiting with open arms and made a huge party to commemorate the lost son’s homecoming.

All three stories confronted the religious experts’ entitled sense of special status, their Inner Circle mentality. They presumed special treatment from God because they kept the rules, well, most of them; and expected him to fence out everyone else. Those Pharisaical Inner Circlers routinely neglected, even rejected, all Outer Circle lowlifes.

In each parable Jesus taught us something about his relationship to the least and lost – the Outer Circle. In his lost sheep story he says that he’s an Outer Circle-seeking Savior, the story of the son who came home shows that he anxiously waits for returning Outer Circlers, and the parable of the woman in search of her lost coin presses us to be Outer Circle-seeking saints.

JESUS IS AN OUTER CIRCLE SEEKING SAVIOR

*“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ 7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” **Luke 15:3-7***

The Messiah that the Pharisees and other God experts made up in their minds would choose them for his Inner Circle. They were the best “Christians” in town. so certainly they would be his Generals

while all the actual bad people wouldn't even make it in his army. That's why they couldn't understand what he was doing eating meals with LGBTs and lazy drug addicted homeless people – oops – I meant “sinners and tax collectors.”

His lost sheep story meant that he came especially for Outer Circle types, the people least likely to succeed in society and in the Church. “I'm not willing to give all my attention to you,” implied Jesus, “I gotta go out and find people who have totally lost their way.” He doesn't just *accept* outsiders, he goes way out of his way and chases after them! The ninety-nine ought to be mature enough to not need his constant attention. It was the disoriented sheep that were incessantly on his mind. “*Don't make this flock all about you guys! There are wandering sheep out there; and I've got to go find them and bring them back.*”

We tend to think that we're the good people and that it only makes sense that he would treat us with special attention. Of course, he does treat us kindly and with great care, but in his parable the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine, not in an oasis, but “in the open country” while he goes after lost lambs. I don't mean to imply that God has a limited capability to attend to all his creation at once. We know that he's omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent, but we should also remember that he's a Shepherd on a mission to recover wandering and disoriented sheep. We're not the only ones on his mind. He's relentless about locating and luring back to the flock every lost lamb that will let him carry them home.

Much unlike us so-called Inner Circle Christians, it's the ones on society's margins to whom he gives special attention. He doesn't just welcome them into our clubhouse when they come in their own power, but searches them out and carries those who can't walk for themselves. He carries the ones who need carrying, the rest he invites to join him in his passionate pursuit of hobbled lambs.

“Yeah, but isn't it their fault that they can't walk? They ran off and tried to live without the shepherd, so shouldn't he make them walk home? I mean, no one held them down and pumped drugs into their veins. They're poor because they won't work. If they're gay they chose to be gay. (Well, maybe or maybe not. I don't know, I'm just repeating what I've heard people say.)” But do you think Jesus even cares how people got themselves in their predicaments? Does he have a probationary period for those who wandered out of his pasture and needed to be carried home? It seems to me that it's the ninety-nine with the greater responsibility to stay close to the paths of righteousness for his name's sake and then join him in his loving project to gently carry the wanderers home.

“Does he not...go after the lost sheep until he finds it?”

He's not sitting on his hands, waiting for people to come home. He seeks relentlessly “until” he finds that one lost lamb. He may be *patient*, yet it couldn't accurately be said that he's in any way *passive* about bringing the cast offs home. God is the ultimate missionary. He's more obsessed about bringing his children back home, so if you want to be near him you'll have to join him on his recovery missions.

He's an Outer Circle Savior. If you fancy yourself an Inner Circle saint will just have to get used to it.

THE FATHER LOVES OUTER CIRCLE SINNERS AND WANTS HIS INNER CIRCLE SONS TO LOVE THEM TOO (Luke 15:11-32)

The most familiar of the three stories is what we typically call the Prodigal Son Parable. Of all Jesus' parables, this one probably contains the largest cache of spiritual themes and lessons. Each character is significant. There's the defiant Outer Circle Son who rebelled and later repented. There's the Pharisaical Inner Circle Son who detested his father's fawning over his Outer Circle poor excuse

for a brother. And then there's the father who loves his sons fervidly and equally – both the Inner and Outer Circle one. Both sons broke their father's heart. One left home, while the other one was never really "at home" to begin with. He was as lost as his younger brother, albeit lost while at home. The younger was lost in his rebellion with an empty stomach and the other was lost in his religion with an empty heart. Both needed to come home!

Entitled Inner Circlers – like the oldest son – are revolted by the father's love for lost and found sons. They want to make the kingdom about themselves and neglect, if not outright reject, Outer Circlers, people that aren't like them, and maybe never will be.

The religious son saw his brother in a completely different way than did the father. All the father could see was his son come home – his beloved boy who he'd been patiently waiting for. Unable to contain his happiness he threw a party to commemorate the once lost, now found, son. But the firstborn saw nothing but a ragged, odorous, and pitiful profligate. He had no compassion, no joy for his return. "You asked for a position on father's staff of servants, that's the best you can expect. Frankly, if I were Dad, I wouldn't let you in the house let alone throw you a party!"

The older brother had a point, you know. His little brother ruined his own life. No one forced him to waste his inheritance. His decrepit condition was due to his shameful choices. "What do you expect? You did this on your own. You have no one to blame but yourself!"

"All these years I've been slaving for you and you never gave me a party!"

Inner Circlers boast that they're essentially better than Outer Circlers. "I've kept all the rules, paid all my dues, done all my chores, and he gets the party!" Outer Circlers reject the party and resent anyone who enjoys the father's house. The meal, the music, and the merriment of the kingdom are not part of their religion, especially if there are going to be sinners there.

The older brother gladly let his wanderlust brother go in order to get more for himself and doesn't seem to have made any effort to do what older brothers do, and at least try to talk him out of leaving. He had no desire to share the house with anyone, let alone such stupid sons as this one.

The story ends before we know how it turns out. The Spirit, no doubt, was tugging on the Inner Circlers listening. They knew enough to know that he was addressing their entitled spiritual self-centeredness. He left the story unfinished so that we would see ourselves in it. Like a movie with alternative endings, this story could end in a number of ways. The best of which is where oldest son gets it. He sees his slavish and self-centered "relationship" to the father and admits he's jealous of his irresponsible brother. He repents of his unkindness and resistance to be loved unconditionally and joins the party. He relinquishes his Inner Circle status earned by outward obedience and he reasons that if his father loves Outer Circlers, so should he.

Instead of glowering at his brother and standing guard at the door to keep him out until after an intense interrogation he cleans up, he stands at the door with arms open wide to welcome him home.

THE SPIRIT LIGHTS THE WAY FOR OUTER CIRCLE SAINTS TO SEEK OUTER CIRCLE SINNERS

"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." **Luke 15:8-10**

Of the three, this tiny parable is probably the least familiar and its interpretation a little up for grabs. Each one of these stories seems to feature a different Member of the Trinity. Jesus stars in the lost sheep story as the Shepherd and the Father plays the protagonist in the prodigal son parable. I propose that in this one the Holy Spirit is depicted by the lamp that lights the way for the woman who is on a quest to find her lost coin. To my mind, the woman herself represents the Church – the Bride of Christ – who, in the light of the Spirit, fervidly searches for lost, but priceless people.

Like the Church in collaboration with the Spirit, she goes on a vigorous hunt for her lost coin. Beginning with the widest circle of her influence and with the Holy Spirit's help she does everything she can to recover lost souls. This brings to mind one of the Bible's final statements where we're said to harmonize with the song of the Spirit as we call out to all lost but valuable souls: *"The Spirit and the Bride of Christ say, 'Come!'"* (Revelation 22:17)

Together the three parables portray a balanced approach to how lost people are found. In the lost sheep story the Shepherd (Jesus) does all the finding, which highlights the Calvinist approach to salvation. In the prodigal parable the father, instead of going out after his son, he waits till the boy comes to his senses and returns home. This sounds more Arminian where human responsibility is key. In the parable of the lost coin, the woman seeks and sweeps until she finds it. We might call this the Evangelistic approach, which is the balance point between the two disparate theologies. It helps to remember that we do the proclaiming, the Spirit does the persuading, and people do the partaking (or not).

"... silver coins"

That's what people are to God – like precious and priceless coins. He's a Collector. But like a coin lying in the dust, the lost Outer Circler does no one any good. It has intrinsic value. It still has stamped on it the *image of the king*, but until it's found and restored to its rightful owner it benefits no one. Like the sheep in the Shepherd's pasture and the son in his Father's house, the coin has to be at home with its Owner for its value to be realized.

"Doesn't she light a lamp?"

The woman lights candle, not so the coin can see her, but so she can see it. In the same way the Holy Spirit helps us find trashed yet treasured people and empowers us to bring them back to their rightful Owner.

We Christians suffer from degenerative vision. We don't see the people around us very well, especially Outer Circle people, the ones least like us. We've lost sight of lost people in our world and fail to see their eternal value to God. We light a lamp but we still can't see those around us, because we let the Spirit shine only on us in our own Inner Circle churches. We tend to care only about what he can do for us and not for the coins we've lost.

We rationalize our ostentatious efforts and expenditures as an attempt to get people to look at *us* and be impressed with our captivating presentation, which will indirectly and eventually lead them to Jesus. In my opinion, it usually just leads them to our church and not so much to Jesus. If we're going to ask the Spirit to shine his light, we should be prepared to hold his beam out in front of us where it belongs. There we'll see his buried treasure the way the Lord sees them, and we'll go out of our way to captivate them with the winsome love of Jesus instead of our impressive properties and programs.

"She sweeps the house and searches carefully..."

The woman is determined to find her coin. It's my opinion that we're way too casual about searching out and lifting lost people out of the dust. Of course we aren't equipped or called to save anyone, but the Spirit will help us find them, love them, and bring them to Jesus who will do the saving.

She sweeps and searches carefully because the lost coin is “her coin.” If the woman in the parable represents us (the Church), then we’re the “losers” in the parable. In one sense, the coin was ours and we lost it. As inadequate representatives of Jesus we’ve misplaced many silver souls over the centuries. I wish I had a silver coin for every time I’ve been told, “I used to go to church. And while I like Jesus; I just can’t stand the Church!” Another coin lost to a careless Church.

Not only did we “lose” them to begin with, but we also *lose out* on the benefit of having them among us. Each treasured soul that’s missing is not only lost to heaven but to our family here on earth. Like silver coins, every person possesses enormous value to God and also to us, even – and maybe especially – eccentric Outer Circlers; and it’s our responsibility to find all lost coins within the reach of our broom and bring them home. The menial task of sweeping is never beneath Outer Circle saints. It’s our privilege to don our work clothes and swing our broom till we uncover dirty yet dear coins and bring them home to the Lord who carefully washes clean and polishes each one till the King’s image stamped at birth is restored.

“Doesn’t she sweep and search ... until she finds it?”

In our search for lost coins we give up too soon. We don’t sweep and search with the same sort of persistence as the woman in the parable. We make a trifling effort and call it a day – “No coins here!” Outer Circlers see what others don’t and are willing to sweep where others won’t until they find the ones most hopelessly lost. They realize that God is on a friendship quest and joining him in his passionate pursuit of people is their most sublime joy.

As in each of the three parables, the woman throws a party and *“calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’”*