

The Third Sunday After Trinity, A ✕ D 2008

Luke 15:1-10 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." ³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. ⁸ "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 You've heard the accusation before, maybe you've even levied it against others: The church is full of hypocrites. So? Where else would you like hypocrites to be? Worse than hypocrites, perhaps, are all the other kinds of sinners the church is filled with: liars, murderers, fornicators, cheaters, drunkards, gluttons. You name it, they're here. That's what made the Pharisees so mad.

2 "The tax collectors and the sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'" How does that strike you: Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. Put it another way: Jesus receives hypocrites, liars, murders, adulterers, cheaters, drunkards, gluttons, and more, and eats with them. It kinda rubs you the wrong way, too. That means that Jesus welcomes those you suppose should not be in church. "Sinners welcome," the sign outside might say. And, in theory, you probably believe that, until, of course, a sinner comes in and takes a seat next to you.

3 Does hearing that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them make you think that you should welcome sinners and eat with them, too? Does it make you think of all the people that you're reluctant to welcome? That's not a bad thing to do, but it's not the point of the reading from St. Luke's account of the Gospel for today. If you think that when St. Luke talks about

“sinners” he means those other than yourself, people you the righteous should be welcoming, you’ve missed the point of Jesus’ parables.

4 There are only two kinds of people in the parables: sinners who are lost and sinners who are found. The Pharisees know the irony: there’s no such class of people who are the “ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” There are those sinners, Luther says, “who misuse the beautiful, comforting comparisons and examples, asserting that Christ loves sinners and that the angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner who repents, and then they themselves forget about repentance. They continue in all types of sin [and] defiance...They sin freely against God’s grace and mercy, and at the same time persecute and hate God’s Word...This Gospel lesson is not speaking of this sort of sinner...Rather, this Gospel speaks of those sinners who draw close to Christ to hear him, that is, that they may learn from his Word, confess their sins, begin to believe, and to amend their lives. These sinners are the true sheep who cease from straying and are happy to be found by their Shepherd, Jesus Christ...Christ makes the sign of the cross upon such sinners and pronounces upon them a comforting, happy absolution: Your sins are forgiven.”

5 There are two kinds of sinners: those willing to dine with Jesus and those unwilling to dine with Him. There are those who receive the Lord’s gift of repentance, willing to be found by the Shepherd, and those who refuse to repent, unwilling to be found. There are two kinds of sinners, but only one kind of Savior. Not only does He receive sinners and tax collectors and eat with them, but He goes looking for them.

6 The Shepherd left the ninety-nine, the company of angels and His Heavenly Father, to seek after lost sheep. He would have gone seeking, were there only one, only you. But He came seeking after all sinners, the whole of humanity. He came seeking for all sinners, the tax-collecting kind, the hypocritical kind, the lying kind, the adulterous kind, the murderous kind, the kind whose sins are outward and apparent, and the kind whose sins are inward yet equally heinous in the eyes of God. He came seeking the kind of sinner that in your eyes could never

be reconciled to God. He came to save the kind of sinner who only knew how to flee rebelliously from the Shepherd. He came to save you.

7 Your eyes can see no one else's sins better than your own. In the lives of others, you see only their outward sins or the ones they confess to you. But in your own life, you can see deep into your own heart, the place from which Jesus says come "evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander" (Mt. 15:19). When St. Paul looked at his own sinfulness, he was unlike the Pharisees who wanted to point their fingers at others as worse sinners than they. St. Paul, instead, seeing all the sin within himself, seeing his inability to free himself from sin, concluded that he was the chief of sinners. Here's good news for Paul, who saw himself as chief of sinners and good news for you who cannot but also esteem yourself as the worst sinner: "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost." The grumbling of the Pharisees is the purest good news: Jesus receives sinners and eats with them.

8 The Son of God became the chief of sinners in your place. Jesus the Good Shepherd left the safety and comfort of the ninety-nine to find the sheep of mankind who had gone astray. He gathered upon himself all your sin, sins of hypocrisy and self-righteousness, the evil sins that come from your heart, the sins from which you could not emancipate yourself, the sins that caused you to reckon yourself the chief of sinners. In order for the Shepherd to bring you back into the fold of righteousness, he had to deal with the penalty for your sinfulness. So He did. On the cross, the Chief of Heaven became the Chief of sinners. His death in your place is why He can carry you back to dwell with Him.

9 The Shepherd still gathers lost sheep. And the woman continues to look for her lost coin. The Church, the Bride of Christ, searches for the Lost. She lights the lamp of the Word of God and searches. She sweeps the house from top to bottom, unwilling to rest until she finds her coin. She uses every means at her disposal, the means through which her Lord has promised to deliver His grace—His Word and Sacraments—to call lost sinners to repentance

and to deliver to the penitent forgiveness of sins. Through the waters of the font of Baptism, the Church makes saints out of chief sinners. Through the word of Absolution, she holds them in her loving grip. And through the feast of forgiveness at the Lord's Supper, she continues to keep her priceless coins in the safety of her purse.

10 When the Shepherd comes back into view with the sheep whom anyone else would have written off as gone forever carried safely on His shoulders, when the woman emerges triumphant from the dustiest corner where no one else would have thought to look for the coin, when one sinner forsakes his sinful way and repents, all of heaven rejoices. Yours is the Lord who welcomes sinners and eats with them. The angels sang their joyous *Te Deum* when you were delivered from being lost. Yours is the Lord who receives sinners and eats with them. So the cacophony of heavenly voices continues to shake the pillars of heaven each time a sinner is brought from death to life.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
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