

The Third Sunday after Trinity, A ✕ D 2009

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 Maybe you've never spoken their words out loud, but you can certainly sympathize with the Pharisees and scribes who grumbled against Jesus, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." Tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to hear Jesus. Now, tax collectors were not the innocuous nerds of the IRS who push pencils and crunch numbers to determine how much you owe. No, tax collectors were much worse than that. They were traitors. They were Jews who worked for the Roman rulers. They didn't work on commission or receive a salary; they made a living by extorting from their fellow citizens. Whatever they collected above the required taxes they got to pocket. And, so, they were rich. Filthy rich, not legitimately, but from exploiting their fellow countrymen.

2 Would you invite a traitor to your family table, not just someone unpatriotic, but a genuine traitor, who has made his living by betraying his countrymen? How about a child pornographer, who turns a profit from exploiting children? Or a rapist, who takes what he wants by violence and force? Or a terrorist, who wouldn't think twice of bombing a building filled with innocent civilians? Or a prostitute, a murderer, a dictator, a known thief, a sinner of ill reputation?

3 Oh how the tongues would wag when your neighbors found out whom you were having over for dinner. If that's the kind of company you keep, what can they conclude about you?

Here, you empathize with the Pharisees. They wanted a neat and clean religion of the Law, one where sinners and righteous are separated by easy-enough-to-keep rules, that hedged them from the underbelly of society. If Jesus were keeping company with tax collectors and sinners, it would certainly tarnish His reputation, and—by default—that of the rest of the rabbis, as well. So, no, there's no inviting those kinds of sinners over for dinner, you suppose. Maybe lesser sinners, sinners more like yourself.

4 But Jesus doesn't tell the two parables in today's Gospel reading to teach you whom you ought to invite to your dinner parties. It's not an exhortation for you to receive sinners and eat with them. It's an exhortation to be received by Jesus and to dine with Him. Paling around with Jesus means keeping company with sinners. Not sinners any worse or better than you, just whose sins may be different from your own. Whether a murderer in action or only in angry thoughts, whether an adulterer outwardly or only inwardly with lustful desires, whether a robber by trade or only when it's time to fill out your taxes, whether an outright liar or merely one who slanders by speaking the truth, whether a traitor to a nation or only your friends, whether publicly affiliated with the worship of a false god or privately trusting in all your self-made gods like money, pleasure, and free time, this fact remains: there is no one on this earth in the company of the ninety-nine righteous ones who need no repentance. The Pharisees and scribes knew the irony of Jesus' parables, and so do you. There are only two kinds of sinners: those lost and those found.

5 The Pharisees and scribes, however unwittingly, spoke the greatest comfort: this Man receives sinners and eats with them. But that's not the full picture, as Jesus' parables go on to illustrate. Even as last week's Gospel reading indicated, Jesus isn't in the business of waiting for you to come to His banquet. Not only does He receive sinners and gather them around His table, but He intentionally goes looking for them.

6 The Shepherd could have cut his losses with 99 sheep still in His fold. He could have guided them back into the city and been satisfied with a 99 percent success rating. But He

didn't. He left the ninety-nine to search for the one lost. The Son of God left the company of angels and the other two Persons of the Holy Trinity, left the ninety-nine righteous ones who need no repentance, in order to search for lost humanity. He descended from heaven and went looking. He took human flesh in the Virgin's womb and entered His own creation with flesh and blood. There was no distance that the shepherd would not travel, not even the lonely march from Jerusalem to Calvary, where at last, with his arms outstretched and nailed to a cross, He found the sheep for which He tirelessly sought. There, bearing all of humanity's sinfulness, dying as the worst sinner of all, he shouldered the lost sheep to carry it back to His flock safely through His death.

7 The woman could have left the coin lost instead of going through the painstaking work of scouring the whole house for it. Instead, she lit a lamp and swept the entire house. The Son of God descended into the mire of human sinfulness and swept the whole house clean in order to find one lost coin, lit the light of His Gospel, in order to search for sinners hopelessly lost.

8 This Man, the God-Man Jesus, receives sinners and eats with them, but more than that, He searches for them. He desires that not one would remain lost. You who suppose your sins too great to be forgiven, take heart. Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. There is no sin so great that Jesus did not die for it. Nothing is too big to be forgiven. Be found by Him who searches ceaselessly. And you who grieve for those who have gone astray, take heart. Jesus still searches. He shines the light of His Gospel wherever His Word is proclaimed. He sweeps and sweeps even into the farthest corners of the house. And He travels any distance to find the one sheep who has wandered astray. Parents whose hearts ache for children who are lost, wives whose longing is for your husbands to be found by this searching Savior, friends whose tongues trip and whose words falter when trying to call dear friends to repentance and faith, all of you take heart. This Savior for whom death was not too far to travel, searches far and wide.

9 He receives sinners and eats with them. You who have been found, rejoice. As St. Paul declared, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. That Christ Jesus came

into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” And to the Corinthians, “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Such you were, but you have been found and gathered by the One who receives sinners in order to feast with them.

10 Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. Although, at His feast, of which He gives you a foretaste today, there are no sinners. There are only those washed, sanctified, justified, forgiven by the very food they feast on: the Body and Blood of Jesus. Sure, your old sinful flesh still wrestles against you and entices you into sin, which is why you so desperately need to feast on Jesus, with Jesus, often. Those whom Jesus receives at this feast are those whose sins bore and whose punishment He received on the cross. Just as they did when you were baptized, found by the Seeking Savior, the angels and all the company of heaven rejoice over one sinner who repents and desires the forgiveness and life offered freely in the Lord's Supper.

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

Soli Deo Gloria
Pastor Jeff Hemmer
Hope, Jerseyville