

The Third Sunday after Trinity, A✠D 2010
Luke 15:1-10

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

1 Joy comes from repentance. There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. Nothing makes the angels more joyful than seeing a lost sheep returned, a lost coin found, an impenitent sinner turned to repentance. "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost" says the shepherd. "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost," commands the poor woman. There is joy before the angels over one sinner who repents. So, what is repentance?

2 Repentance is "nothing other than to truly acknowledge sins, to be heartily sorry for them, and to stop doing them. This knowledge comes from the Law" (FC, SD, V, 8-9). "This is what true repentance means. Here a person needs to hear something like this, 'You are all of no account, whether you are obvious sinners or saints in your own opinions. You have to become different from what you are now. You have to act differently than you are now acting, whether you are as great, wise, powerful, and holy as you can be. Here no one is godly'" (SA, III, III, 3). The Old Testament word for repentance means to turn or to return. The Greek word means a mind change. Repentance is 180 degrees. You need to be the opposite of what you are.

3 What isn't repentance? Repentance is not merely acknowledging sin while not wishing to be free from it. Repentance is not "Yes, it's sinful, but it's not that bad. Yes but it's a small sin. Yes but..." Not repentance. Sin is deadly. There is no small sin. Repentance is not comparison. "I'm a sinner, yes, but I'm not as bad as all those other sinners." "God I thank you that I am not like other men" sent the Pharisee home unforgiven. Not repentance. Repentance is not a plan to sin. You cannot be sorry for your sin and still plan to continue it. That's fake repentance.

4 Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. To be received by Jesus, you must acknowledge your state: you are a sinner. 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 God hates sin, all sin. Sin is rebellion against Him, choosing death instead of letting Him be the source of life, preferring to be your own god instead of allowing the Triune God who created and redeemed you to be your only God. God hates sin not as some capricious, cosmic killjoy but as your Creator, who loves you and wants what's best for you. His Commandments are for your good, to guard the gifts He gives: your possessions and workers, your name and reputation, your daily bread, your marriage, your body and life, your parents, His Word, His name, and most importantly Himself. He hates sin, but He also hates to be wrathful. He takes no pleasure in wrath. "As I live," declares the Lord GOD, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ez 33:11).

6 God is your Father. He adopted you through the waters of Holy Baptism. He is your perfect Father, whom all earthly fathers are called to emulate. No wonder, then, that He sent His Son, the Good Shepherd to seek after the sheep that had strayed. Only a wicked father would let his children wander into peril. He has made Himself your Father, and He has given you an earthly father to stand in His place. God gives us men as fathers to minister to us, to serve in the place of our Heavenly Father, to call us to repentance, to teach us the Word of God, to model faith and repentance, to forgive our sins, to teach us the Catechism, to deliver Jesus to us. Where your fathers have done that for you, give thanks to God. Fatherhood is a holy estate, a calling issued by God the Father Himself to men undeserving and imperfect. Where you men have failed to do these things faithfully and fully, live in the same repentance that God desires for all people. Teach repentance to your sons and daughters by being repentant.

7 There is joy in repentance. There is joy among the angels. There is joy in heaven. There is joy in the Trinity. There is joy for you in repentance. When God through the proclamation of His Law works repentance in your heart, when He sends fathers or pastors or friends to call you to repentance, when He causes you to despair over your ability to save yourself, when He works the mind change of repentance in you, give thanks. There is joy in repentance. The Lord “does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread all our iniquities under foot. [He] will cast all our sins into the depth of the seas” (Mi 7:18-19).

8 The call to repentance is proof that God still seeks the lost and straying. These parables are not about the lost; they are about the found and about the Lord who seeks the lost. 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 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. The Son of God became the chief of sinners in your place. He gathered upon himself all your sin, and 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. He tread all your iniquities under His foot that was nailed to the cross. And He has cast all your sins into the unfathomable depths of the seas of Holy Baptism.

9 There is no greater word of comfort than what the Pharisees intended as an insult to Jesus: “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. He receives them and takes their sin as His own. So, 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. As you see it, there are only sinners at the Lord’s altar, but that’s not how your Lord sees it. Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. Those whom Jesus receives at this feast are those whose sins He bore and whose punishment He endured 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