

In Nomine Iesu

The Third Sunday after Holy Trinity 2021 Who is found in Jesus' presence? – Luke 15:1-10

“Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Jesus to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, ‘This Man receives sinners and eats with them.’ So He spoke this parable to them, saying: ‘What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!” I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance. Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!” Likewise I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.’”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Church's only Savior and Lord. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

People know Christians are sinners. But sometimes that fact is phrased in a way that reveals more about the understanding of the observer than of the subject. It may come out like: “Those Christians act good on Sunday morning, but they aren't very Christian the rest of the week.” In other words, most people think that Christianity is about good works. They think “being Christian” means being behaving in a certain way.

I

The devil is pleased when people take the bait and believe that only good and wonderful people are children of God. But to be a Christian is not about being good all the time; it is not about being without sin. Such an understanding of Christianity will either lead us to despair over the reality of sin in our lives or into judgmental hypocrisy. Christianity does not have its focus on good works; and it most certainly does not teach that we gain the favor of God by doing good works. That is not Christianity. That is the teaching of the Pharisees. It is the natural and false religion of corrupt and fallen man.

Jesus received and ate with sinners as the Pharisees stood at a distance and sadly shook their heads. They were shocked by the sinners who often made up Jesus' congregation. Why, they reasoned, why does He spend time with such people? Why does He not dine with us who behave well. The Pharisees considered themselves masters on the subject of sin and the law of God. They felt they knew the Scriptures well. But, dear friends, there are no masters when it comes to God and His word save the One who came from God, the One to whom the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament bear witness as the only Savior of sinners. But the truth that we need a Savior from sin goes against our natural way of thinking. And because that is so, it is impossible for us to know the Word of God too well or to hear it too often. The Word of God testifies that Christ alone is the Savior of the world, the Savior of sinners. That is its central truth, its shining light. It is not possible to meditate on this central truth and come away neutral. No, to seriously confront this truth is either to be humbled as a sinner or to think as did the Pharisees.

So it was that the Pharisees, despite their many acts of charity, caused no rejoicing in heaven. Indeed, heaven's angels do not rejoice over our personal goodness and upright

behavior. They do not rejoice over our charity, fund raising, offerings, and food pantries filled for the needy. Now make no mistake, all these things are good and necessary; and certainly help people. What is more, we are called to them. But what does the One who came from God, say about such things? “So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.’” (Luke 17:10) No, dear friends, what the angels rejoice over is repentance. They rejoice over conversion and salvation. They rejoice when one who was lost and condemned is found and brought home.

To be a Christian is to be the cause of angels rejoicing. It is to be gathered by our Lord to Himself, to be ruled by His forgiving presence in His kingdom of grace. It is to listen as He speaks, to eat and drink as He gives nourishment and peace with His body and blood. To be a Christian does not mean that you must be a paragon of virtue whose kids never get into trouble, or that you never speak or do any evil. It does not mean that your life must be able to pass inspection by the pastor. No, to be a Christian means one thing: to hear the Good Shepherd’s voice, to be found by Him who seeks and calls. To be a Christian is to be forgiven and drawn to Christ. It means to listen to, and eat with, Jesus.

II

That being said, hearing Jesus always brings shame with it. For His hearers will suffer the same insults and attacks that Jesus Himself experienced. Hearing Jesus will bring us shame by association also. For we will be in the company of shameful people. Gathered about our Lord will be tax-collectors, prostitutes, drunkards, liars, sinners of every sort. The Pharisees of our day rightly call us sinners, not only because we gather with other sinners, but gathering to listen to Jesus means hearing God’s word. It too shames us. It humbles us by speaking the Law. It cuts into our hearts, and exposes our secret desires. It leaves us helpless. In truth, God’s word joins with the Pharisees in calling us sinners. But rejoice in such shame, dear Christians, for blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who, finding no righteousness in themselves, hunger and thirst after righteousness. Jesus receives just such hungry and thirsty people, and dines with them. He assures them that theirs is indeed the kingdom of heaven.

As we gather today in both the shame and honor of hearing Jesus and suffering insults, our Lord tells three stories: one of a lost sheep, one of a lost coin, and one of a lost son. The purpose of all three is the same: To show both forgiven sinners and those who still are lost in unbelief how precious each soul is to God. God does what the world will not and cannot do! Think about it. Weigh carefully what Jesus says. Which of you would leave ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness, in danger, and go after the one which is lost? Which of you would spend a whole day looking for a single coin of little worth? Which of you would give your best to a rebellious son, who betrayed you, and welcome him back into your home? But Christ Jesus our Lord is not like us. He doesn’t worry about honor and profit. He is moved by love that knows no shame. He behaves foolishly with His good gifts. He is willing to die for sinners, to honor the shamed. He confounds the wisdom of the wise. He is foolishness to the Gentiles and a stumbling block to the Jews. He loves to love us. He will not be put off by some Pharisee’s wagging tongue about “sinners.” He came to seek and to save sinners. He came to save you.

The gnawing in your hungry soul that longs to be filled and know peace, the regret you have over selfish actions and mean-spirited behavior, your desire to be as good – and even better! – than your neighbors expect you as a Christian to be, all this is hunger for righteousness. Your sins, and the guilty conscience they give you, tell you that you are deserving of death. That is why you long for life, you long for what you do not have. But without that knowledge of death, without that longing for righteousness, you would

waste away in ignorance or stubbornness. God's Law causes that gnawing pain. But it is for your good. It keeps you from enjoying your sins. It causes an emptiness that if not filled will lead to despair. It is the beginning of wisdom, real wisdom. It can be filled by Christ alone, who says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." To be here this morning is to come as a hungry sinner desiring to be filled by Jesus.

+++

Every time you bow your head and whisper heartfelt sorrow over your sin, every time you confess your sincere desire to not do it again, placing your hope in His mercy, not your good deeds, every time you hear the Gospel with a shudder of relief and real hope for the future, the angels in heaven rejoice. They rejoice because you are a Christian, a forgiven sinner, one who looks to Christ alone to lift you out of the pit of despair you have dug for yourself with your many sins. The Law leaves you helpless and shamed. But Jesus fills you, rescues you, and honors you. He is your Hope, your Comfort, your only true Friend in this fallen world. He is your Savior and Shepherd. He receives you and eats with you. He is the One who goes out into the cold, evil night of sin to bring you back home upon His shoulders rejoicing, and all the angels with Him. He is the One who holds you aloft for all your neighbors to see after having diligently swept away the dust and dirt that hid you. He is the One who welcomes you home even after you left Him and went looking for what you thought was better, only to return hungry and broken. For you are precious in His sight, and welcome in His presence. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

SRS – 20 June 2021