

In Nomine Iesu

The Third Sunday after Holy Trinity 2022

Bad pennies all, and yet priceless coins – 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:

St. Luke wrote: “Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him 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.” What follows is not just a parable, but three, three parables for the Pharisees and scribes to consider as they looked with scorn at the tax collectors and sinners, three examples of what it means to be lost and helpless.

I

Jesus, as Luke noted, often placed pairs of people or things before his hearers, the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple, Mary and Martha, the rich man and Lazarus. In doing so He is inviting hearers in His day and in ours to consider each of the pairs and, so, learn something about themselves. He does the same here, but instead of using two individuals or groups, He uses two different groups of two each: tax collectors and sinners and Pharisees and scribes.

Which of these two groups would be called good and upright? Which is righteous in the sight of God? Tax collectors, who regularly overcharged the people in order to enrich themselves? Sinners, that is, those who openly violated morality in order to make their living? Such people were not good and upright. They certainly were not righteous in the sight of God. Then it must be the other group. The Pharisees were those who believed that by strictly adhering to a complex set of rules over and above the things Moses required they could avoid sin. The scribes were the professional copyists of the Holy Scriptures. They lived and worked constantly in and around the temple. The scribes and Pharisees looked on those who, like the tax collectors, often broke the 7th Commandment in making a living, and the “sinners,” who violated the 6th Commandment. Yes, the scribes and Pharisees looked down on those who sinned in these ways, but were willing to stretch, bend, and tear to

pieces the 8th Commandment – “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” – in order to share their judgment of such people with each other.

So, which of these two groups would you call good and upright? Which righteous in the sight of God? The fact is, neither is good and upright. Neither is righteous in the sight of God. Both are guilty of sin. Both fall short of the glory of God. Both stand under the condemnation of God’s law. They are all, as we say, bad pennies. There isn’t a precious coin to be found in the lot of them.

And that is exactly the point of the three parables Jesus tells to each of the scribes and Pharisees as tax collectors and sinners listen in. No matter in which group they find themselves, each is a sheep hopelessly lost, each a coin fallen to the ground and having rolled unseen into a remote space, each an ungrateful son who thinks his father owes him a portion of the inheritance and cannot wait to shake the dust of his upbringing off, go far from home, and start living the life he deserves to live. All are lost. They are just different kinds of lost.

As tax collector looks at Pharisee, and Pharisee at tax collector, each sees what he does not want to be. As sinner looks at scribe, and scribe at sinner, each sees only a bad penny not worth picking up off the ground, much less going to all the trouble of lighting a lamp and carefully sweeping the whole house to find so worthless an item. If God were like us, there would be no hope for any of us.

II

We might ask, what is the point of setting before us two different groups? If all are just sinners, two piles of bad pennies, why does Luke bother to distinguish the one from the other? Listen again: “Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him 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.”

What is the difference between the two groups? First, the tax collectors and sinners were people who chose to live outside God’s law. There are many such people like that today, who plainly see the “thou-shalt-nots” of the Ten Commandments to be impossible to keep. They have broken them, and there is no going back. They are like the criminal who has committed so many crimes that to commit one more to cover up another and so escape retribution just a little longer, makes no difference. In fact, it can even be justified in their minds. They say to themselves, “God, if He even exists, will just have to understand. These are the choices I had. These are the mistakes I made. I am long past making excuses for my behavior, and that’s my excuse! That’s my justification! I have done what I had to do.”

Second, one could say of the scribes and Pharisees that they chose to read God’s law in the way that was most flattering to themselves. There are many such people like that as well, who’ve decided the “thou-shalt-nots” of the Ten Commandments must be doable in some measure. They’ve not broken them as seriously as others, certainly not in such a way that their other fine qualities should be ignored. They look at those around them and see that their life is closer to what God demands in His law than that of others. They say to themselves, “God, if He has any sense of fairness, will see that my life, my efforts, have been purer and better than those of many others. I have made better choices in life. Surely that is worth something!”

Dear friends, be warned, God accepts neither justification. He condemns both. He sees two large piles of bad pennies, one badly scratched and nicked up, dull and unattractive, and the other containing those rubbed with copper cleaner to look better, but already showing signs of tarnish. Neither pile has any like the newly minted, flawless coins that first came out of the stamping machines at the mint.

But there is a difference observable in all three of the parables that follow. Think about them again. What is the difference? The tax collectors and sinners drew near to Jesus to hear Him. This sheep was sought by the shepherd and found. That coin was diligently searched for by the woman and found. The prodigal son, beaten, defeated, and miserable came back to the one place where he'd not been betrayed, but had enjoyed protection, food, shelter, and love – all of which he had scorned and taken for granted at the time. All these lost ones were found only because the shepherd actively sought sheep that continued to run, with each step wandering ever deeper into the wilderness that is life. The woman diligently searched for the coin that could do nothing to help, but only lie in the dusty darkness. The father's love permeated the prodigal son's memory in the day as his stomach growled from hunger and in the night as some of his nightmares gave way to dreams of better days in the past, in his father's house.

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Dear friends, there is no one here today who stands before God good and upright. There is none who will be justified in God's sight by his or her own righteousness. All are lost. If you do not know it, these three parables are directed to you, to your heart and mind, so you would see how lost you are. But if you know it, you will find yourself, like the tax collectors and sinners, drawn to Jesus' words of promise and hope, because you saw yourself in the parables: lost sheep, lost coin, prodigal son. You find yourselves captivated by His forgiving words, spoken to you ... you! You find in yourselves a deep gratitude toward Him, who could with every right just call you a bad penny, but now calls you a precious and dearly sought coin, worth calling together all to rejoice with Him because you have been found.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, came into the world to seek and to save what was lost. He came into the world to live before God as we have not, to be the priceless, brilliant, perfectly minted coin in His Father's treasury. This coin the Father willed to spend in order to buy back all the bad pennies, and make them new again. This is the message, the good news, that so captivated those who saw that they were lost. Jesus Christ gave Himself both in life and death to redeem us, to claim us back, to give us His perfect righteousness so that we might be justified in the sight of God for His sake. So, come, tax collectors and sinners, Pharisees and scribes, bad pennies all. Do not seek to justify yourselves, do not think yourselves either too far gone to be saved or so much better than others that you have no need for salvation. For the sake of His Son the Father sees in you a precious, priceless coin, one He desires to keep in His treasury forever and ever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria