

Trinity 3 Luke 15:1-10 June 27 – 28, 2009

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

A lot of people have the wrong idea of what church is all about. They think that church is just for the “**good**” people, a club for the morally upright. And so, they think church is not for them. Or others see it this way. They say, “**Sure, those people act all good and holy on Sunday morning; but you should see and hear them the rest of the week. They don't always act Christian.**” They say that the church is full of hypocrites, and so they stay away; they don't want to be a part of that.

But both of those perspectives have a fundamental flaw. For both of them think that Christianity is primarily about good works. They think “**being Christian**” means being nice and behaving. And that totally misses the point. The devil is pleased that they have taken his bait and believed his doctrine. In truth, to be a Christian is not to be good all the time or never to sin. Such a false idea of Christianity leads either to despair (because you can't measure up) or hypocrisy (because you actually think that you do measure up). Christianity is not centered on good works.

Listen to today's Epistle. “**Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.**” Only sinners. If you're not a poor, miserable sinner, then Jesus isn't for you. If you think you're a pretty good person on your own without much of anything to confess in thought or word or deed, then you're in the camp of the Pharisees. Jesus received and even ate with sinners. The Pharisees stood off at a distance. They were shocked by the terrible sinners that made up Jesus' congregation. Jesus was sitting down to lunch with the equivalent of gang members and sex offenders! He was doing so not to bring down judgment on them, but to call them to repentance and forgive them.

The Pharisees thought that they had no need for repentance; they thought that they did not need a physician for their souls. But that was only because they didn't know how sick they really were. And which is worse-to be sick and not be aware of it, or to know you're sick so you can be given the treatment to heal you? Both the Pharisees and the sinners Jesus was hanging out with were equally sin-sick. They just had different symptoms. The repentant sinners received the cleansing medicine that Jesus gave; the Pharisees did not. For their symptoms, pride and self-righteousness, had the appearance of being very spiritual. So it is that these “**good people,**” despite their many fine deeds, caused no rejoicing in heaven. Angels do not rejoice over the MDA telethon, or Bill Gates giving billions to charity, or Boy Scouts earning merit badges, as good as those

things are. What the angels rejoice over is repentance. They rejoice over penitent faith in Jesus.

To be a Christian is to be the cause of angels rejoicing. It is to be gathered by Our Lord to Himself. It is to listen as He speaks, to bask in His forgiving presence at His holy table. To be a Christian does not mean that you must be a pillar of the community whose kids never get into trouble, or that you never speak an off-color word, or that you must write rousing letters to the editor and belt out the national anthem at ball games, or that your relatives never fight or drink too much. Rather to be a Christian is to hear the Shepherd's voice, to be found by that seeking Voice and in it to be forgiven and drawn to Him. It is to listen to, and eat with, Jesus.

The Lord of Life searches out sinners. He is looking for someone to love. Those who are without sin don't need to be loved. Jesus wants to be with sinners, to eat and laugh with them, to love them, to redeem them. He does not come merely to berate and scold them. He wants to serve them, renew them, give them real life. That is what makes the Pharisees and scribes angry, and sometimes bothers us, too. No one would be upset if Jesus came to teach these people a lesson, to show them how bad and stupid and selfish they really are, to make them feel some of the pain they've caused. But to simply forgive and love them seems too easy and naive and foolish. But Our Lord doesn't care what shame it brings: Jesus did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance, to seek and to save the lost. He desires mercy for sinners. He lets them off the hook without cost or conditions. And if you are His friend, you will rejoice with Him over every sinner that He finds and restores and blesses. For it's by that same undeserved love that you, too, are saved. If you are His friend, you will count yourself among their number and be glad to call these embarrassing, uncouth, sinful, repentant people your brothers and sisters.

Jesus is like the shepherd who loves every single sheep in his flock so much that he does something reckless, even foolish: He leaves the 99 unguarded for a time to get the one lost sheep back. He doesn't just cut his losses and say, "**Well, at least I've still got the 99.**" Instead, He risks it all to restore each and every one of you, so important are you to Him. And when He has found the lost sheep, He puts it on His shoulders and carries it home to the flock. Indeed, Jesus put us all on His back, and carried our sin all the way to the cross. He shouldered the punishment that we deserved so that we would be carried through death to the new life of His resurrection. Now we are safe and secure

in His flock once again, where He feeds us in green pastures and leads us beside the still waters.

Jesus' seeking love is also like that of a woman who has lost one of her valued silver coins. Married women in those days would often wear a ten-piece garland of these coins around their neck as a sign of their marriage. To lose one of them would be something like losing the diamond from your wedding ring. And so she turns the house upside down in order to find it, lighting a lamp and sweeping in every nook and cranny. And when she has found her coin, she is so filled with joy that she throws a party with her friends and neighbors to celebrate. That is how precious each of you are to the Lord— even more so. For He purchased you not with gold or silver coins, but with His own holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. When His searching love has found you and restored you, the heavens rejoice. Because of Christ, your friends and neighbors include the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, who celebrate with you at the feast of salvation.

And there is even more for us in these parables to learn. For it is no accident that the two characters here are a shepherd and a woman. The shepherd is the pastor, and the woman is the church, the chosen Lady of our Lord. Pastors preach the forgiving love of Christ, and you who are His bride show that by welcoming sinners into the congregation, even as you have been welcomed by Christ. Together, the shepherd and the woman, pastor and people, as the body of Christ, demonstrate the truth that Jesus still receives sinners and eats with them, right here in this place, right here at this table.

So don't be too proud to keep company with sinners. For that is where Jesus is, in congregations like this, with people like us, calling us to repentance, showing us abundant mercy. He didn't just die for the moderately decent, for the polite members of society, for people who meant well but made a few mistakes. He died for all. His death is enough to cover even the worst and ugliest of sins. Jesus loves you perfectly, without conditions or fine print, without limit. So, come. Be His guest. Join in with outcasts and sinners. Be united in repentance and faith. Be filled with His Body and Blood given and shed for the forgiveness of all your sins. You are of great worth to your Father in heaven. He has sent His Son to be your Champion and Rescuer. He has found and bought you. You belong to Him and He has brought you here, to the great joy of the angels. In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.