

Sermon for Trinity III – Luke 15:1-10

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

Sinners were drawing near to our Lord. They were coming to Him to hear Him. Not to see Him or touch Him, but to hear Him. For hearing Jesus is the means to salvation. Faith comes by hearing. Sinners need to hear God's forgiveness. Pharisees and scribes wanted no part of this. "This man receives sinners and eats with them." The religious leaders criticized our Lord for this reason. Their pride was in themselves. They earned it and they were better than others. They needed no help.

But the self-righteous do not always appear to be so arrogant and judgmental. They often appear to be quite humble and are even able to laugh at themselves. These outward appearances can be the perfect façade. They can hide their pride even from those closest to them, but never from God. He looks not on the outward appearance, but on the heart. And that's why Christ wants to cut to our heart. So that we find no righteousness in ourselves, but in Him alone.

God graciously receives sinners. He receives us, even though we are undeserving. We are forgiven for Christ's sake and this is the definition of true righteousness. Our Lord spells this out clearly in today's parables. "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?" The answer to the question is "not one." No one would do that. We would cut our losses and keep the ninety-nine without taking the risk. It's just one sheep, after all. But not to the Good Shepherd. Every one of us is valuable to Him and worth every effort to seek out when we stray. "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?" Now this is more likely. And the point that our Lord is making is clear: those who are in the house and lost are worth seeking out. Sinners who are of the house of God and gone astray are valuable to pursue.

But this is the problem for the Pharisees. Christ Jesus received sinners and declared fellowship with them. Holy men cannot associate with unholy sinners. Jesus was a man with miraculous powers and unmatched wisdom. In their view, He must not receive sinners and eat with them. What is holy represents God and must not be mixed and tarnished by what is unholy. And yet, in Christ this paradox stands: the holy God who cannot tolerate sin freely forgives sinners.

Christ our Good Shepherd seeks us out. In our relationships with those who are closest to us, at times, we have a tendency to stray from each other. When feelings are hurt, when we're upset over this or that, when disagreements arise, we pull back—we stay away. Why is that? I would suggest that it is because we want to be pursued. We put them at distance because we want the other person to seek us out, hear our perspective, ask forgiveness, and strive for reconciliation. Sometimes this works, but

mostly it doesn't. For when this doesn't happen, further resentment and confusion results in a crazy cycle that keeps spinning until the initial issue is resolved through forgiveness and reconciliation or the relationship dies.

But Jesus isn't like us. Jesus seeks us out. When we stray, He will not stop seeking to find us. The Good Shepherd hears our pathetic cries for help, even though hardened hearts, turned backs, and slammed doors. He wants us. He lifts us up and carries us home. He will not stop until we are His again. His Church also searches for us. She has the Gospel and Sacraments. She searches her home, sweeping away everything that could keep us from God's grace. Like the treasured bride and mother in her house, the Church is constantly cleaning her home by returning to the pure and clear words of the Gospel, which alone is our power and refuge.

We are the sinners. And poor, miserable, helpless ones at that. We have not loved God with our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbor as ourselves. We deserve God's judgment and punishment and not His love and approval. And yet, we are not worthless and of no importance to God. For God loves us, in spite of all that we've done against Him. We are lost sheep and lost coins who have never escaped God's notice. When we hid our sins from those nearest and dearest to us, we didn't hide them from God. He knows the very worst there is to know about us, and still, He loves us. He seeks us out. He shows us our sins to show us that Christ has died for each and every one of them. We are forgiven.

This is a new perspective, yes, a heavenly one. One could say that the entirety of Holy Scripture is a window into heaven, and a way to see what heaven is like while we dwell here on earth. But this parable is an even clearer view of heaven than many other parts of the Bible. The angels rejoice over one sinner who repents. For what is despised on earth is admired in heaven. There is great rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents. What brings disgust on earth brings rejoicing in heaven.

Consider Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector who had become wealthy by ripping off the poor. Christ freely forgive him and had fellowship with him. This led Zacchaeus to repent of his sins and follow Christ. After Christ forgave Zacchaeus his sins, this forgiven sinner gave half of his wealth to the poor, and paid back twice the amount the law required to those he had previously cheated. Christ's forgiveness does not cause us to sin more. It changes our hearts and lives. Far from being a license to sin, Christ forgiveness frees us from sin's power and gives us power to live holy lives.

So we can stop the cycle. We can freely forgive. We can even pursue and be reconciled, for the Good Shepherd never stops seeking us. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠