

The Third Sunday after Trinity
2 July, Anno Domini 2017
St. Luke 15:1-10
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Maybe it's because we've heard it so many times or maybe it's because, and for good reason, we have simply come to expect it, but the opening verse of today's appointed Gospel are absolutely profound. "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus." In just a few short words, the heart and beauty of the Christian Gospel are set before us and the parables that follow only serve to elaborate on this statement.

Jesus SINNERS doth receive. He gladly invites them into His presence. The very people a holy and just God should despise and abhor, Jesus draws to Himself like a magnet. He doesn't despise them or turn away from them. He wants them. He is pleased to be with and among them because they need Him. The very fact that they have rebelled and turned against their Creator is the reason that there is Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. The Son of God came with the singular purpose of being among sinners so that He might save them from their sin. No one who has confronted the ugliness of their sin would ever imagine that God would want them in His presence. But that is exactly what God desires! And so, by the preaching of salvation, He draws us near to Jesus.

It is absolutely incredible that Jesus would have these tax collectors, murderers, adulterers, and Gentiles surrounding Him and enjoying His fellowship. It defies all logic. More than that. It defies the very Law of God! These are the people that should be utterly excluded from God's presence by God's own judgment. The Pharisees' grumbling is quite understandable. They know well the story of Moses and Mt. Sinai, how the mountain burned and quaked as the divine Law was given. It was terrifying. God hates sin. He can't tolerate it. He can't abide evil. It must be eternally cast out of His presence.

The Ten Commandments are absolute. There is no room for debate or excuses. You either keep them or you don't. If you are holy as the Lord your God is holy then it will be well with you and you will receive the promised reward of eternal life. If you walk in the ways of the Lord then you will enjoy His fellowship and eat at His table. But if not, if God is not your highest good and His will your greatest joy at all times, if you despise His gifts and will not draw near to Jesus, if

you walk in the folly and wicked ways of this world, then the Word is equally clear - you must die for your sin.

But Jesus is no Moses. Jesus didn't come to do what the Law already does very effectively and completely. Not that the Law is evil or flawed. We are. Of ourselves we are incapable of obeying the commandments. We are evil. The Holy Law of God has a 100% success rate when it comes to revealing the evil of our hearts. You can be sure if it demands something of you, you haven't done it. And because the Law's condemnation is true and we ought to be condemned to hell for eternity, Jesus draws near because God doesn't want you to die. He has prepared a way.

Jesus comes to save, to gather wandering sheep and lost coins. And then Jesus gathers all of heaven to rejoice when even a single sinner receives in faith the life and forgiveness He offers. Jesus is the seat and source of God's mercy and no one needs mercy except wretched sinners. That's why He wants you with Him. He wants to pour out God's mercy to you. By no means does Jesus ignore your guilt or the sinful desires of your heart. He sees them more clearly than you can. But, thanks be to God, "the saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..." (1 Tim. 1:15) Amazing! God wants to be surrounded by sinners. Not, of course, to excuse or participate in our sin. He can't do that. But He can and He does bear your guilt for you. He can, and He has been charged with your sins, died for them, and baptized you into His atoning death. He wants to give us life, to reconcile us to God, to cover us in His righteousness. He wants the only voice your conscience hears to be His absolving you of your sin "Take drink, this is my Blood shed for the forgiveness of all your sins."

It is most certainly true: we are sinners through and through. We have arrogantly believed that we actually are better than the drunk, the prostitute, the crooked politician, the so-called transgendered activist, the Muslim terrorist, the person next to us in the pew. We have taken our turn in the seat of the Pharisees as though we need less mercy than them. We have refused to show mercy to those who have grieved us, who have sinned against us, whom we have judged unworthy of forgiveness.

Repent. Christ will not be found among those who don't need mercy, who aren't terrified by their sins, who will not count themselves among the tax collectors and every other sinner. Those who believe themselves to be righteous enough are those who refuse to gather around Jesus and receive the gifts He gives. Their

bellies are filled with the mammon of this world and their own purported righteousness. Their place around Christ's table will be taken from them. But for those whose consciences are tormented by guilt and shame, who live in terror because they know the Spirit of God searches the heart and mind, Christ Jesus has come with the soothing balm of God's forgiving love. He is the invitation into the very presence of God we know we could never possibly deserve. By His Word He draws you near to Himself, proclaiming God's desire to save you. He gathers you up into His arms and carries you out of death. He holds before you His wounded hands and side which have been pierced for your peace. He doesn't give you more to do. He offers you gifts. He invites you to the seat at His table which He has prepared for you.

This is why the church will always be derided and scorned by the world - it is filled with sinners, with broken people, with the undesirables, with the weak, with the hurting. The world despises them because it is too filled with its own righteousness. But Christ through His Church receives them and rejoices over them. The Gospel will always find a home among the hopeless and helpless, the poor and needy, the lost and the lonely.

To such as these, such as us, no sweeter words could be proclaimed or bring us as much joy as this - the Lord Jesus wants sinners to draw near to him. God grant that you find fresh joy in this divine invitation to the Savior's presence and surround you with fellow sinners with whom you can share this same mercy.

In the Name of +Jesus.