

The Third Sunday after Trinity
16 June, Anno Domini 2024
St. Luke 15:1-31

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Precious children of the heavenly Father,

A few years ago, while Alissa and I were in Germany, I lost my phone. My heart sank as soon as I realized that it wasn't with me. I looked everywhere. I went into shops. I looked by the benches. I looked everywhere on the bus. Nothing. Thankfully I did end up finding it under my vestment bag in the overhead storage. But until I did, I was filled with anxiousness because we were in a foreign country and I had lost a rather pricey item that actually belonged to the church.

When we lose things of value to us, regardless of whether it is monetary value or just sentimental value, we will turn our world upside down to find them. Everything else we are doing will be set aside because we NEED to find our lost treasure. And maybe that makes some sense if it is of significant monetary value. We can understand the woman who lost a tenth of her wealth sweeping her house clean until she finds that tenth. And maybe we can even understand searching for the lost sheep, though one out of hundred might not be worth the time and the risk to the others. And certainly, as I experienced, an intense feeling of relief and joy sweeps over you when what was lost is found. I didn't throw a party when I felt my phone under that bag but you can be sure we all rejoiced.

And if we get that excited when inanimate objects and trinkets are restored to us, imagine the great joy of God when one of His lost and precious lambs is restored to Him! Christ Himself, who descended from the heavenly throne of His Father, tells us that all of heaven rejoices when one single sinner repents. And why shouldn't they? A Christian who was in danger of the eternal fires of hell has returned to have his sin washed away and to be restored to the family! Of course there will be rejoicing - the greatest rejoicing! When one of God's sheep wanders away, back into the devil's kingdom, God doesn't just shrug His divine shoulders and say "Oh well. I still have a lot of other sheep. What's one compared to the many?" And it doesn't matter to God, who shows no partiality, whether the wandering sheep is one of the strong, healthy, "valuable" sheep or the sick, feeble, "worthless" sheep. They all matter to Him. He has called each of them by name that they may be His. His concern isn't what the sheep bring to Him. His

concern is what He alone can give to the sheep - life and eternal salvation. That's why He absolutely did receive tax collectors and sinners and ate with them. These outcast Jews were returning to the family through God's Son! That is exactly what God desires for all men!

We have all known dear Christian brothers and sisters who leave the church and the faith. We have recently had to remove some families from membership because they no longer come and don't respond to any of our communications. That's heartbreaking. People with whom we once shared the very Body and Blood of Christ suddenly and often without saying, say "I reject you and your faith. I no longer want anything to do with you or care what happens to you. I am looking for something better. I don't like that you have blemishes and weaknesses and that you don't do everything exactly the way I want it done." This is a knife to the heart of Christians who hold the faith dear because Christ binds us together as a family in Himself and in this family we have the joy of bearing others burdens and having our own borne by them. To leave is to reject your family as the prodigal son. He rejected his father and wished him dead so that he could have his inheritance and not be with his family. Understand, that is what you are saying when you withhold yourself from this, your family. When we don't pray for one another, when we avoid talking with one another, when we don't come to church, when we don't give our offerings we are saying "I don't care about you or what happens to you."

It is hard to be in a family to be sure. We do sin against one another. We speak against one another. We jockey for power and position. Each of us has annoying quirks. Sometimes we say stupid or mean things. We aren't always polite. We drop the ball. We don't try to bear as much of the load as we can and leave it to others to do the work. Sometimes we pretend like we didn't know or hear about the need, so that we can have more time and money to ourselves and the things we want. And most of the time we are not setting out to hurt our family. But we are still family. We are bound to one another because we are bound to our one Father through His one Son by the one Holy Spirit. And so we forgive one another even before there is repentance because forgiveness is the foundation of this family. You are in this family because you have been forgiven of your sin.

Even more painful than releasing our brothers and sisters when they will no longer communicate with us, is when the Church finally has no choice but to excommunicate one of her children. In excommunication the Church in love declares that a person who was once a Christian is no longer and now stands outside of God's grace and under His eternal wrath because that person stubbornly refuses repentance and is living an openly sinful life. There is no joy in that day

either in heaven or on earth. It is a terrible day of intense sorrow. Or it should be. There should be tears and mourning because one of God's children, if they do not repent, will suffer the eternal torments of hell instead of sitting around the family table of God because that is what they chose.

That is the terrible truth lying behind the parable of the prodigal son. Not all of God's children are restored to Him. God forbid that ever be anyone here. Not all the sheep who wander away return. Jesus doesn't tell us whether the older brother actually repented and came inside to celebrate with his family. And that should cause a wrenching in our very gut. It does in God. We dare not delude ourselves into thinking that those close to us who have forsaken the truth are okay. If they are rejecting Christ, if they are confessing a different means of salvation, it doesn't matter that they used to believe or that they were baptized or that they were confirmed or that they were faithful. Those are the very things they are rejecting and they do so to their eternal destruction. To pretend otherwise and remain silent is to put your hands over their eyes and say "Peace! Peace" when there is no peace, so that they can't even see that they are walking down the broad road to hell.

And we should't simply mourn them. That's certainly not what God our Father does. Think how often we have strayed in our own sin, seeking our own way and our heavenly Father has come after us, searching for us because He wants us to be with Him and He does not want us lost to the devil. He understands the stakes and takes them with the utmost seriousness. So should we. We should go out and find our wandering and lost brothers and sisters and try to bring them back in as the father sought his older son. We should be earnest about praying for them daily and take the opportunity to call them and very intentionally urge them back to the family table. And don't wait until months have gone by. If you notice someone has not been in church in a couple of weeks, reach out and see if everything is okay. Hopefully it is and they have only been sick or traveling. But maybe you'll find out that they are struggling and need Christian encouragement. And you can provide it or you can lead them to their pastor so that he can help. And then we can all rejoice to see them in the pews again and eat our Father's good food together!

The way in which our Lord leaves the parable of the prodigal son open, reminds us that some return but not all. The invitation remains but it can and sometimes is rejected. And while that is painful, do not let that reality rob you of the joy of those who have and who have remained. God forbid we wander off seeking a better family with fewer sinners. God forbid we turn up our noses when prodigals return, even years later, covered in the filth of their sin but longing for their Father's forgiveness. May we throw parties the likes of which the world has never seen

when one of Christ's precious lambs returns to be restored to their position as child. For we have been the prodigal. We have taken the blessings of God's kingdom and used them as an excuse to cover ourselves again in the evil of the world only to return with the terrible burden of guilt wrapped around our necks in desperate need of the Father's mercy and compassion.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, to have mercy upon them, to wash you in His Blood and cover you in His righteousness. Praise be to Him who relentlessly searches for His wandering sheep and takes the greatest joy and pleasure in finding them!

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.