

Trinity III, 2006  
Text: Luke 15:1-10  
Trinity Lutheran, Worden, IL & Zion Lutheran, Carpenter, IL  
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✠Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ ✠

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

There is nothing cute about a lost sheep. A sheep who wanders outside the sheep pen is smelly and dirty and on the fast track to death. There is nothing endearing about the fact that a coin is lost. A lost coin is useless precisely because it is lost. And let us also recall the parable that Jesus tells after the two we have heard in our Gospel lesson – there is nothing noble about a prodigal son who wishes his father were dead so that he might have his inheritance now, who then goes out and wastes that inheritance in spiteful and wicked living. A filthy sheep, a worthless coin, a hateful son. Indeed these things are lost.

And yet does Jesus receive and eat with sinners. That is almost too easy to say – Jesus receives and eats with sinners – we've tamed that word 'sinner' and it has thus lost its force. But recall just what the Pharisees were offended at: Jesus ate with tax-collectors – men who had betrayed their country and extorted money for the foreign invader; prostitutes – women who debased themselves for pay; thieves – men too lazy to earn their own keep; and the list goes on. Indeed, fill in for that word “sinner” whatever sin you find most despicable: Jesus receives and eats with child-pornographers and rapists, with murderers and drunks, queers and abortionists, gossips and proud, cruel, arrogant know-it-alls.

And that's why the Pharisees hate Jesus. To sit with Jesus means you have to sit with and receive these sinners whom Jesus receives. You must take your place at the table where only sinners sit. The Pharisees hate this leveling off, this making all equal before the Lord. They want to hold on to their decency. They want to prove themselves right – to justify themselves by their basic goodness, by the fact that they try their best; they want to think of themselves as not quite that bad. They do not want Jesus as much as they want respect and approval and the praises of men.

And can you not hear your own thoughts in the thoughts of the Pharisees? Have you never prayed to the Lord asking “Why does he get it so easy and I have it so hard? I have certainly been a better person than he has!” Or have you never

felt the sweet satisfaction of looking down on someone you know – speaking about them behind their backs to your other friends about how screwed up, or mean, or wicked they are? Do you not constantly daydream about how you will finally one day expose your enemy's vice and triumph because of your own virtue?

Repent, o Pharisee. Take your place at the table of sinners. It's where you and all the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve belong. For as the Scriptures say, “There is no one righteous, no not even one. None who do good and seek God.” And again, “All your righteous acts are as filthy rags before the Lord.” You have no goodness that will impress the Lord – in his eyes there is nothing to distinguish you from the other members of the crowd of sinners. Proclaiming that you are better than this one or that one is like having a beauty contest at a leper's colony: there is no difference in beauty that an outsider would care to recognize as beautiful. So give up trying to prove yourself to God and others and instead sit down with Jesus – for he desires to receive you and eat with you.

For he is like a shepherd who, though the sheep has run away and become filthy and wretched, still he leaves home and searches for him. He finds that awful sheep and takes him home, cleans him up and feeds him. Or again, he is like unto a woman who will leave no spot in the house unswept until he finds that worthless coin and makes it worthy. Or again, he is like unto a Father whose love knows no end – who runs to his foolish, sinful son and refuses to treat him as a slave – but gives him a new robe to wear and bids him sit down at the feast.

For he is Jesus – the Lord who saves, who came to seek and save the lost. He is the Good Shepherd, who not only searches for the sheep, but lays down his life for the sheep. For that is what is necessary for sinners to be brought back into the fold of God. Jesus sits with sinners because he came to die for sinners – of whom I am chief. Indeed, this Good Shepherd is made to bear the filth of the sheep who wandered away from his sheep pen. This Father of the Prodigal Son, dies the death the Prodigal once wished on him – only so that the Prodigal might be forgiven and live.

That is the meaning of the cross: that is where Jesus seeks the lost, where he pours out his life to atone for your sin. In this saving act of Christ, you have new life. The punishment your sins deserved is laid upon Jesus and he dies the death you owed God. And when the debt had been paid, when he who knew no sin had been made to be sin for us, then he rose again from the tomb forever triumphant over death. And now he brings this salvation to you today.

For remember what the Father does for the Prodigal Son and what the shepherd does for the sheep. A new robe is now brought to the son and the sheep must now be washed of his filthiness. And is this not a beautiful picture of Holy Baptism? For Holy Baptism is called in Scripture “the washing of rebirth and renewal.” Again we are told that “all those who have been baptized have put on

Christ.” Christ washes you up in Baptism and restores you to God's Kingdom. Indeed, you now wear Christ about you as a garment. His holiness and sacrificial death are now your protection; in Christ, God is now well-pleased with you. He has borne you on his shoulder by bearing on his shoulder your cross, and now all is well. You are forgiven. You are washed. You are clean and whole and restored to the kingdom of God.

And what is more, he invites you now to sit with him at Table, to take your place beside all the other sinners who repent of their sin and desire new life. He bids you come to the feast made ready when the Shepherd of the Sheep who is also the Lamb of God gave his body and blood for your salvation – he presents these fruits of his cross, his true body and blood, to you now for the forgiveness of your sins. And the angels rejoice to see you receive him so!

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

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Now the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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