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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19C)

September 11, 2016

Text: Luke 15:1–10

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

The genius of the gospel writers is that they bring you into their retelling of the life and teachings of the Lord Jesus. At almost every turn, the reader or hearer of the gospels are invited into the story as participants. We are brought into the story so that we find our place; those actions and scenes become our story, our history. The characters begin to represent us in profound and mysterious ways.

Today's reading from Luke 15 certainly fits the bill. In this reading, there are two groups of people. The question is which one do we identify with. The first group is described in vs. 1: tax collectors and sinners of every sort "were all drawing near to hear Jesus." The riff-raff, the shady characters who've made bad decisions, those who've forsaken better ways of living, the garden variety, everyday day sinner, all of them are drawing near to Jesus.

Our Lord's demanding teaching about denying ourselves, loving Him more than family, forsaking earthly possessions, and striving to enter God's eternal kingdom through daily repentance and faith haven't driving this group of listeners away. They can't get enough of Jesus. And Jesus receives them with open arms. He's eating with them, rejoicing in their newfound faith, receiving them as His disciples and treating them as God's beloved children. He loves it! Jesus can't get enough of them either. There's lots of joy between Jesus and this group.

That's one group. The other is described in vs. 2, "And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'" It's safe to say that the life and teaching of Jesus isn't appealing to them. They are jealous of Jesus' popularity, suspicious of His teaching, and scornful about His low upbringing in the no-nothing, back woods of Nazareth. In a twisted sort of way, this group can't get enough of Jesus either. But there is no joy between them and Jesus.

These two groups are as about as opposite as you can imagine. The Pharisees and scribes excelled in holiness of life; they were people of Scripture, prayer, and daily

devotion to the ways of the God. The tax collectors and sinners weren't known for prayer, Bible study, and daily faithfulness to a holy way of life.

Which group do we want to associate with? I'm sure most of you know the answer you're supposed to give, the first group: the tax collectors and sinners who are rejoicing with Jesus in faith and salvation. But the second group appeals to us because ... well they are so like us as Christians! Don't we encourage a life of prayer, Scripture study and memorization, and daily devotion to God in every thought word and deed? Sounds like the Pharisees and scribes to me. And that's the drama, the dilemma we ought to experience when reading the Scriptures in general, and Luke 15 in particular. We want to be like the Pharisees and scribes but we also want to rejoice with Jesus.

The Lord gives three parables to help sort all this out. Today's reading gives you two of them: the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. The third one, the parable of the Prodigal Son, isn't part of the today's reading. It usually comes up during the Lenten season. All three focus on the themes of being lost, of being found, and of rejoicing when the lost are found. Let's look at the two parables in more detail. We may just be surprised and rejoice at what Jesus teaches!

Vs. 4, "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?" This is ordinary, day-to-day type work for shepherds. The Pharisees and scribes should have made an immediate connection to the OT teaching that God is the shepherd who seeks and finds the lost sheep of Israel (today's OT reading, Ezekiel 34).

Vs. 5–6, "And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'" This too should appeal to the Pharisees and scribes. They considered themselves to be shepherds of Israel. Should they not rejoice when a lost sheep is found, one of their lost sheep, whom God has placed under their care? Why the grumbling? Joy is the appropriate response!

Now the second parable. Vs. 8, "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?" Losing 10% of all the money you have is a big deal. This lost coin is probably a denarius or a drachma. Either way, the coin this woman losses would be roughly equivalent to a day's wage. You wouldn't shrug off a day's wage, would you?

Vs. 9, “And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’” There it is again, joy and celebration with friends and community over finding that which was lost.

Now we’re back to our original question. Which group do we want to associate with? The riff-raff and sinners with whom Jesus loves to eat with and receive? Or the fine, upstanding, religious leaders who appear to be following God in all the right ways.

Would we joyfully associate with a convicted felon showing up in our services? What about families with rowdy kids? Or persons who have more tattoos than clothing and body jewelry sticking out from every conceivable location? What about Muslims, Mormons, Hindus, Jehovah’s Witnesses, etc gracing our services in order to learn more about Jesus? What about families from different cultures? Who think differently about Christianity? What about that cantankerous neighbor, difficult co-worker, or that person whose personality clashes with yours? Those with different politics than yours, both local and nations? I could go on and on.

Or would we associate with the righteous looking of society, the Pharisees and scribes? They look like us, act like us, think like us.

At the end of both parables (vs. 7, 10), Jesus declares that there is more joy in heaven and among the angels over one sinner who repents than there is over the self-righteousness of the unrepentant. Jesus and the heavenly host rejoice with joy unspeakable and happiness filled with glory when sinners repent; that is, instead of following the ways of sin and death they change their minds – repent, turn 180 degrees – and follow Jesus in justifying grace.

Every time you pray the Lord’s Prayer, “and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” the angels rejoice. Every time you received the body and blood of Jesus, the heavenly host surrounding God’s throne roars with joy! At every baptism, at every hearing of God’s Word whether read, taught, or proclaimed, at every confession and absolution...well, you get the point...whenever sinners repent God the Holy Trinity smiles in joy.

Which group is your group? Are you ready to associate and rejoice with repentant sinners of every sort? Or do you want to sit back and grumble at the new work of salvation God is doing through the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus came to seek and save the

lost, to justify sinners, to redeem the outcast, to love the unlovable, to rejoice in repentance, faith, and eternal life.

Today is the 15th anniversary of the September 11th attacks. Our world is so very different because of that event. We remember the 2,996 people killed that day. And thousands since, many in our military, who have sacrificed their lives to protect us, to prevent such atrocities from happening again. We remember families who have lost loved ones and others who suffer because of what began 15 years ago. But what has not changed is the joyous, amazing message of the Christian Church. No evil can overcome or destroy this gospel message of love, life, and joy. I intentionally chose today's opening and closing hymns with this thought in mind. Why Should Cross and Trial Grieve Me (LSB 756) and Jesus Lives! The Victory's Won (LSB 490) were written long before September 11th. But their joyous message speaks just as clearly and redemptively as ever.

The message we are to proclaim all the more boldly and joyously is that Jesus redeems humanity through His life, death, and resurrection. He is the shepherd who seeks the lost sheep until it's found. He is the woman who tears the house apart looking for the lost coin until it's found. And when that lost sheep, that lost coin, that lost sinner is found, there is rejoicing in heaven and earth. We are that rejoicing community of saints on earth and in heaven! That's the amazing message of Christianity. It's not primarily about morality or ethics but about sinners finding a loving God who forgives, renews, restores, and heals unto eternal life. It's about joy, real, genuine, abundant joy flowing out of the forgiveness received each and every moment from a loving Savior.

Some may grumble at our congregation being such a place where real sinners can repent and find real forgiveness and eternal joy. Be that as it may, under God's love and grace, more sinners will come, hear the gospel in its truth and purity, repent of their sins, be baptized in God's Trinitarian name, feast on consecrated bread and wine, and be filled with the joy of heaven. Let's embrace the joy of heaven.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.