

Third Sunday after Trinity
June 20, 2010


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Minneapolis, Minnesota

✠ Jesu juva ✠

THE RIGHTEOUS PENITENT

Micah 7:18-20; I Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

he Pharisees and scribes, seeing Jesus in the company of tax collectors and known sinners, complain: "This man receives sinners and eats with them." The fact that Jesus spent time with people whose lives were, to the Pharisees way of thinking, defined by sin, was proof to them that He could not be as holy and righteous as everyone claimed. He could not be the Messiah. The Lord God is holy and He demands holiness of those who would have fellowship with Him. Therefore, because Jesus is receiving sinners, and not only receiving them, but sharing a meal with them, He must not be from God; or so they thought.

Our Lord, knowing the murmuring of their lips and the thoughts of their hearts, tells two parables. First, He likens God to a man who, having lost a sheep, rejoices more in finding the lost one, than in the ninety-nine that were never lost. And He says: "I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance." And then He likens God to a woman who has lost one of her ten coins, and having found it rejoices over it. And He says: "Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." What God is looking for in each parable, is a person who is penitent. And He will turn the world on its head to find such a person. And when He finds a penitent person, a person who is sorry over sin and seeking His grace, He and all of heaven rejoice.

But why does God rejoice more over the penitent sinner than over the righteous person who does not need to repent? Doesn't God want us to live holy lives? Isn't Jesus' righteousness something in which the Father took delight, after all? Isn't His sinlessness pleasing to God? Jesus never needed to repent, and the Father loves Him and rejoices over Him. So why not with the righteous people in the parable?

The point Jesus is trying to prove here is not that God does not appreciate holy people, or that He would rather have us sin more so that He can have more mercy when we repent, or anything like that. Jesus point to the Pharisees was this: God would have mercy on all men. And all men are sinners in need of mercy. Hence St. Paul makes the point in Romans 3 that there is no difference even between Jew and Gentile, let alone between a Pharisee and a lesser or more openly sinful Jew: "For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

The 99 righteous persons in the parable are not really righteous. They are those who have deemed themselves righteous, who think themselves worthy of God's love because of how upright and holy they have been. These are the ones who say in their hearts: God must really be pleased with me. Look at me, God! Not bad huh? And in the case of the Pharisees in the Gospel lesson they went a step further, thinking: You now what? I think I'm even more righteous than this Jesus who eats with tax collectors and sinners. Which is the same as to say: I'm even more righteous than God's Son.

But the truth is that none of the 99 are really righteous; and the Pharisees and those like them today who think they're good enough and in no need of repentance, are more unrighteous than many who have committed what we would consider to be terrible sins and yet have repented. The Scriptures teach quite clearly that no one is righteous apart from Christ Jesus and His grace. Hence David prays in Psalm 142: "Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous."

So, if no one is righteous except Christ, how can God rejoice over them? Only when they repent and believe on Christ Jesus, is there cause for rejoicing in heaven. For through Jesus, the penitent sinner is declared and made righteous, given a righteousness that is not his or her own, but is found entirely in the grace and merits of Jesus.

St. Paul sets himself before us today as an example of just what I have been speaking about. Paul, as you probably know, was a Pharisee. In fact, Paul describes Himself not just as a Pharisee, but as a super-Pharisee: "a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church [which He thought God-pleasing at the time]; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless" (Philippians 3:5-6). Paul was, according to Jewish piety, a very righteous man.

But God did not find him righteous. God called this outwardly zealous and pious man a sinner and a murderer and a persecutor of the Church. And Christ, as you may recall, confronts him most forcefully as he was going to Damascus to round up more Christians to be tried and killed. And Paul, through the miraculous intervention of Jesus, is brought to repentance. And now listen to how this man who many would have called righteous speaks of himself: "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man."

So why did God reach down and save Paul? Because that is exactly what God loves to do. That is what Jesus was doing for the tax collectors and sinners with whom He conversed and dined. He was reaching down to them to bring them to repentance and save them. And so Paul reports: "And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to

those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.” Did you catch that? What God did in saving Paul is the pattern of how God saves us. His giving salvation to a man who was murdering the beloved people of His Church, and who was blaspheming the Most Holy Name of Jesus, who in His eyes was a tremendous sinner, is the pattern! Indeed we must cry out in the words of Micah: “Who is a God like You?” “Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over... transgression... [who] delights in mercy.”

And it is precisely because God does love sinners and does delight in mercy, that you and I can have hope. We learn here that there is nothing so great (in terms of our sinfulness) that God cannot pardon it. If He forgave Paul, He will certainly also forgive you when you are penitent.

And this is so vital for us to know and believe. For one’s sins can feel so overwhelming, that one is tempted (and I mean that literally, tempted) to believe that God will not forgive. One can be so tormented by sin that you feel lost to God. But God always looks for the one who is lost. He looks for that lost sheep, that lost coin. And what does He do when He finds again? He rejoices and all heaven with Him! And so when you feel yourself overcome by your sins, turn again to Christ and seek His aid. Pray with the Psalmist: “O Lord, turn Yourself to me and have mercy on me. For I am desolate and afflicted. Look on my affliction and my pain, and forgive all my sins.” Repent anew and there will be rejoicing in heaven. For God always answers such prayers.

And how do I know that? Because Christ Jesus, God’s own Son, who alone is righteous, who alone deserves His love, suffered and died to win the forgiveness of your sins. There can now be no question of God’s stance toward you. He is the God who loves the sinner. He’s proven it. He is the God who delights in showing mercy.

And now we put our hope and our trust in this mercy of God through Christ Jesus. We say in the words of today’s liturgy: “To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God I trust in You. Let me not be put to shame.” And again: “I will call upon God and the Lord shall save me. He has redeemed my soul in peace.” And yet again: “I will love you, O Lord my strength. The Lord is my Rock and my Fortress and my deliverer.” A now to Him who receives sinners and eats with them, “to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠