

“Sinners, Loved Sons”  
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32  
Fourth Sunday in Lent  
March 31, 2019

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

The Word of the Lord for our consideration this morning is the well-known parable, introduced with this historic context: “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In the beloved hymn, we sing,

“Jesus sinners doth receive;  
Oh, may all this saying ponder  
Who in sin’s delusions live  
And from God and heaven wander.  
Here is hope for all who grieve:  
Jesus sinners doth receive.”

What we sing, we also hear in our text: the God-man truly puts flesh and bone on the Old Testament promise that the Lord is “patient and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” And, thus, his goodness and loving-kindness draws unto himself all who want to be rid of their sin and desire to do better.

One of the most well-known refrains describing Jesus’ ministry is that he gathered with tax collectors and sinners – people whose reputations were soiled by their publicly known sinfulness. On the one hand, the Pharisees seem to have a point: how could Jesus,

if he is really of the Holy God, allow himself to dwell with those known for such shameful and wild ways? On the other hand, the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near *to hear* Jesus, not because his words gave them license to continue on in sin, but because his words gave them hope for a clear conscience before God. They draw near because their conscience is even more soiled than their reputation, and yet – they know nothing else but this life of sin... where is their hope of being freed from it?

If these tax collectors and sinners were hardened in heart, they would not draw near. They would not bear to hear even one word of Jesus. Sadly, how many people there are who fit this description; they love and defend their squandering of the heavenly inheritance, they relish their shamefully wild and self-indulged ways, and they think nothing in all the world can be better than serving themselves and fulfilling life's most immediate and basest desires. To such unburdened consciences, Jesus is not speaking. For such self-praising and bold sinners, Jesus has no gospel.

But, for any tax collector and sinner who draws near to hear him in hopes that he has good news to cheer their miserable state, that he can rescue them from *themselves* and the gutter of life into which they've fallen, Jesus has words of comfort, words of cheer, words that satisfy their hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Of course, there's another type of sinner by whom Jesus is surrounded: the Pharisees and the scribes outwardly have the

reputation of holiness every God-fearing person desires, don't they? They love God's Holy Law; they know it well, and see themselves as confessors of it (and those are not bad things!). But, if their hearts were exposed, they would be more insufferable than the open sinners. At least, there is no pretense with open sinners, who are willing to be seen alongside other known sinners as long as they all can benefit from hearing Jesus and learning from him. But, the pharisees and scribes do not only have a hardened heart toward Jesus, but also toward anyone who would come to him and desire that he make them better.

How many there are who reflect this self-righteous sinner, all who want to determine who is worthy of membership in the Church and want to judge and retain lowly penitents' sinful past rather than rejoice over their forgiveness and share with them table fellowship with Christ!

And so, Jesus, with both audiences within earshot, tells a parable of *two* sons... because he knows that you at times may be counted with either. At times in life, we sinners seem to be so beholden to the Old Adam that we're willing to throw away the entire kingdom of heaven for whatever immediate gratification we desire... as soon as immediate gratification is an option, the things of God we've learned and confessed are so quickly and suddenly forgotten, sidelined, or jettisoned. At other times, we are so pharisaical in our self-righteousness that we believe we *deserve* to

be members of God's family (and perhaps have the right to be put off by lesser Christians who also want to claim membership with Jesus), that we have no need of the call to repentance, that the forgiveness of sins is simply a liturgical formality observed by the righteous, that we really have no need of Jesus or his divine service other than to use the opportunity to display our faithfulness.

It would be wrong to listen to this parable and try and decide which son Jesus wants you to be: Jesus is not making a comparison between the two and saying, "Be more like this one." Do not interpret the parable to supposedly give license to reckless living "because it all works out in the end." Neither interpret the parable to treat the older son as 'the bad guy' and convince yourself that his love of the Law is to be thrown out altogether. Rather, hear and digest in these words of Jesus that we sinners abuse the Law of God in many various ways and – if not for the mercy of our God in Christ – we would all lose our place in the family, have no part in the heavenly feast, and have no joy in the forgiveness of sins for ourselves or our fellow brother in Christ Jesus. But, in the mercy of our God, we have all of these heavenly treasures – life with a clear conscience before God, a heavenly banquet that awaits us, and joy in the news that our brother in Christ has been forgiven and shares us in the feast the Father prepares for us all.

And so, here in this parable we see how the two types of sinners easily confuse the relationship between God's holy Law and

his merciful Gospel. As we've already said, this parable and sermon is not for the defiant one who openly lives in sin with no burdened conscience; it's not for the one who has no use for the Law... that one has no privilege to hear this wonderful parable; rather, it is for the one who, having once disregarded it, now *fears* the Law... and it's for the one who thinks he has upheld the Law and lives in the household because of it. The first of *these* mistaken sinners says, "How can God be merciful when I have so willfully trampled upon His holy Law?" The other sinner says, "Why should I delight in mercy when I have kept the Holy Law?" And, for each sinner, the Lord must graciously and patiently teach that the true delight for both sons is God's household built upon mercy and the forgiveness of sins.

The first son must learn the hard way how much he has lost by abandoning his Father's house. Consider how much easier and better it is to learn God's Holy Law by learning this in the safety of the classroom and never putting it to the test. When sinners refuse to learn it in the classroom, the Lord allows them to unwittingly enter the much more dangerous classroom of life... and because the teacher is not visibly front and center, the students think they can get away with all sorts of mischief. They think themselves their own master tutor, without any fear of discipline or failure. But, soon, their fellow classmates turn on them, their ability to teach themselves fails, and they suddenly know the burden, fear and despair of a wild classroom with no rules.

Or, to return to the image of the first wayward son, what is left to do but sit in the dirt and covet the slop the pigs eat? The sinner has wasted all that God had given, has thrown away all the comfort and safety of life in and originating from the holy house. From that house, he had been able to go out each week with confidence, knowing he had a place of stability and safe return; now in his lawlessness, he must sleep with one eye open and beware of all who would abuse, betray, or kill him; and he despairs that his once glorious freedom has turned into a burden of shame and regret, of weeping and gnashing of teeth. How will the Father ever welcome him home, to be safeguarded in the house and retaught the ways of the household? Where is there any room for mercy when the sinner has already once proven himself so untrustworthy and selfish?

“Maybe,” he thinks to himself, “maybe I can return by appealing to the Law I once abandoned, subjecting myself as a slave of the holy Law.” But, his Father does not desire for the son to live in *fear* of the Law, but to rejoice that the Law serves and defers to the Gospel of the household: “Come,” the Father says in great joy, “You who have had to learn the hard way... do not appeal to being a slave (which by your own strength is your eternal lot)... but, by my love and compassion, you are not a slave, but a son... and, if a son, then the full inheritance, which includes the forgiveness of sins and the

feast of celebration prepared by your Father through the sacrifice on your behalf.

Now, the other son steps into the picture... not running *from* the Law, but trying to justify himself *by* it: “Wait a minute!” he cries: “I’ve kept the Law; I’ve done all that you’ve asked me to do. I’ve faithfully lived my life and been here in this house and done everything to your glory, and now you go and celebrate over someone who has done none of that!”

Isn’t that how we sinners sometimes think; we are almost frustrated at the forgiveness of sins; why should I delight in one who was found, when I was sure to never get lost in the first place. Who’s celebrating over me?”

Remember how we started this sermon with an appeal to a hymn: “Jesus sinners doth receive; Oh, may all this saying ponder Who *in sin’s delusions* live and from God and heaven *wander!*” Is the one who appeals to his own holiness any less delusional or any less guilty of wandering from right doctrine than the one who left the house? Is he not equally ‘lost’? Has he not ‘wandered’ just as far, even without moving his feet? Even if he knows well the holy surroundings of the household, he sees them not as surroundings of safety and comfort, but of self-righteousness and contempt toward others.

And so, the Father must appeal to him and say, “Have you forgotten that this house is a house of joy and fatherly love? ... that

the *holiness* of it serves all in it, that they might *rejoice* in the blessings and Gospel of the household... in other words, that the Law is not employed by the Father for its own sake, but for the sake of the Gospel, and forgiveness, and compassion, and the joy of the forgiveness of sins. Indeed, all the angels in heaven, all the servants of the house rejoice over one sinner who repents more than over the one sinner who believes he has no need of repentance. Thus, (the Father says to the prideful son) because you rightly love the Law, rejoice with me that it has done its part to bring your brother to his senses, that he might rejoice again in the safety of the Gospel. Rejoice with me, for your brother was as good as lost... but now he is found, is nurtured and sustained anew, is alive in the household."

Now, how can we debate back and forth about which son we'd rather be? Weren't both sons mired in sin... and isn't the point of the parable the Father's desire to have both sons again rejoice in the forgiveness of sins and the joy of being a son of God and brother of one another? This is *your* joy when you gather here each week... that those who have been wrong by living life selfishly desiring "my will" instead of "thy will" may repent and rejoice in the feast of the family; and that those who have been wrong by living life self-righteously believing that their desire to live according to God's Law makes them somehow not in need of forgiveness and the joy of their returning brother may repent and rejoice anew in the feast of the family.

And, of course, each son – no matter which one you, in the depths of your heart, know yourself to be – each son is given the clear conscience before his Father and shares love with one another because of the sacrifice that provides the feast. *That* is the subtle final ‘character’ of this parable, isn’t it? Sure, it may be a calf instead of a lamb, but this is just Jesus’ parable... and the dependence upon that sacrificial feast is just the same for all involved, isn’t it? The one son with the father, the second son with the father, and the brothers with one another.

Thus, Jesus – who has brought the sacrifice of the parable into the reality of history – calls us to put flesh and bone on the parable... come join in the feast of his sacrifice, rejoicing in your mutual forgiveness and your equal share as sons in the household of the heavenly Father.

In the Name of the Father  
And of the Son  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul  
Calvary Lutheran Church  
March 31, 2019