

13 July 2011
Pentecost 4 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Greenspring Village, Springfield, VA

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“The Heart of God”

Text: Luke 15:1-10 (Micah 7:18-20; 1 Timothy 1:12-17)

“This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

The Pharisees and scribes thought they had Jesus all figured out. And they didn't like it. Not one bit. And so with these words they grumbled against Jesus, and perhaps also hoped to discredit Him. Lump Him with the undesirables and people will stop following Him.

So how does Jesus respond? Well, He tells them the two parables we heard tonight. And with these parables Jesus is saying to them: No, Pharisees, you haven't got Me quite figured out. For yes, I receive sinners and eat with them . . . **but it's even worse than you think!** For I love them. I want them. I am here searching for them. I am not only hanging out with them, but going after them. I am filled with concern for them, like the shepherd who has lost a sheep. And I cannot think of anything else, like the woman who has lost a coin and is consumed with finding it.

And then, O Pharisees and scribes, *it gets even worse than that!* For when I find them, I rejoice over them. Nothing makes me happier than when sinners repent. Nothing makes me rejoice more than to forgive and welcome back my lost ones. Me and all heaven with Me. And until you know that, O Pharisees and scribes, you don't really know Me.

So with these two parables, Jesus is teaching us about the heart of God. And we marvel with the prophet Micah: ***Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression?*** And marvel we should, for we deserve condemnation. We have rebelled against God, sinned against the Holy One, and wandered off, following our own ways and desires, instead of His. He would completely in the right if He cut us off, cast us off, and considered us no more.

But as Jesus is teaching us this night: that is not the heart of God. His great love for us compels Him not to cast us off, but to come and search for us. In the Old Testament, He sent His prophets, like Micah, to do that, to call out to His people and call them to repentance and faith; to seek and to find the lost. But now, in Jesus, He came Himself. He came in compassion, not condemnation.

And it is in Jesus that the rest of Micah's words - that we heard tonight - are

fulfilled. For in Jesus, God not only tread our iniquities underfoot, He tread the old, satanic foe underfoot, fulfilling the promise He made to Adam and Eve. In Jesus, all our sin is cast into the depths of the sea of Holy Baptism, that it may be separated from us as far as the East is from the West (Psalm 103). And in Jesus, God remained faithful to the promise He swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that from them and their descendants would come the Saviour of the world.

And when Jesus ascended the cross, He showed there just how great the love of God is for you and me and all sinners, preferring that He be condemned rather than we being condemned; preferring that He die rather than we die; preferring that He be cut off, cast off, and cursed, rather than us. That in His death and resurrection, He be the Saviour of sinners.

The Pharisees and scribes didn't see themselves as sinners - at least, not as bad as everyone else - and so didn't want this kind of Jesus. And it is a constant danger that we will fall into this trap as well, comparing ourselves to others and thinking ourselves not so bad - or at least, not as bad as everyone else. But comparison is not the way of it with God, judgment is. Each person, each heart, judged against God's holiness. And if you look into your heart, then the picture is not so rosy. In fact, it is black as death. The lies and phoniness, the hatred and covetousness, the scorn and ridicule, the impurity and idolatry, that should cause each of us to say with St. Paul that we are not the best, but the worst of sinners.

And the longer you are a Christian, and the more you learn and grow into God's Word, you don't outgrow that. In fact, I am convinced that the longer you are a Christian and the more you grow in your faith and knowledge of God's Word, you see yourself growing worse - not better! For you see your sin and its depth more and more and more.

Luther had a friend named Spenlein, who was troubled about this. Seeing his sin more and more, he began to think he didn't have a Saviour anymore because his conscience so troubled him. And so he wrote to Luther for help. And Luther said to him: If you would have a Saviour, you must be a sinner. For Christ dwells only in sinners. Join the rest of us hard-boiled sinners!

What Luther was saying there is what the scribes and Pharisees grumbled about, and what Jesus taught in these two parables: that ***this man receives sinners and eats with them.*** And see, now, what good news this is! For all of us hard-boiled sinners. Not that it's *good* that we're sinners, but that Jesus has not come for the righteous, but for the unrighteous; not for the healthy, but for the sick; not for those who do not need forgiveness, but for those that do. That He has come **for you**. To find you, to forgive you, to bring you back, to love you, to care for you, and to rejoice over you. That's what Jesus wants. He isn't most concerned about what you can do for

Him, He wants you.

So if your conscience troubles you, if you want to make God happy, you know what you do? *Repent*. Don't go to Him with all your good works and holy life. I cannot recall any place in the Bible where it says our good works make God rejoice. It says we are to do them, and that God expects them, but I cannot recall Him *rejoicing* over them. Anywhere. Maybe He does, but we're not told that.

What we are told is that He rejoices over *faith*. He rejoices over *repentance*. He rejoices over finding and forgiving one of His little, lost lambs. Good works will follow, as the fruits of faith, as Christ and His Spirit live in you. But God rejoices over *you*.

And so to finish with those words of Luther to Spennlein: *Therefore, my dear [friends], learn Christ and him crucified. Learn to praise him and, despairing of yourself, say, "Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given to me what is yours. You have taken upon yourself what you were not and have given to me what I was not." Beware of aspiring to such purity that you will not wish to be looked upon as a sinner, or to be one. For Christ dwells only in sinners. On this account he descended from heaven, where he dwelt among the righteous, to dwell among sinners. Meditate on this love of his and you will see his sweet consolation.* (Luther's Works, vol. 48, p 12-13)

Yes, it is true. ***This man receives sinners and eats with them.*** Even today. Thanks be to God!

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