

Pentecost 14C 11 September 2022
Luke 15:1-10
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Let's pray:

It's easy to make the Pharisees villains and lampoon them when we hear stories like today's gospel. But we need to understand their position. Jesus acts in a way that's contrary to what the Pharisees' are accustomed to. The old covenant commanded distance. When God appeared to Moses he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). And when he appeared to Moses at Mount Sinai, one of the first commands was, 'You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, "Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death"' (Exodus 19:12). In the sacred worship of the tabernacle and the temple, distance was always observed. The mass of the people didn't even enter the outer court. Only the priests dared to enter the inner court, and only one person entered the holy of holies once a year.

No mortal eye was permitted to see the Shekinah, except that eye which once a year alone dared to look upon its splendour through the mist of the smoking incense, when the blood of atonement was sprinkled on the mercy seat.

It's as though the Lord needed to teach humanity that sin was so utterly loathsome to him that he must make them feel the chasm of separation between a holy God and the impure sinner. But Jesus came to replace "Go" with "Come." Barriers were smashed down and we were brought near by the blood of Jesus Christ: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28) — that's the joyful proclamation of God in human flesh.

There's little wonder then that the Pharisees, who had viewed God as an awesome, distant, unapproachable light, should be astounded that a person claiming to be the Messiah, who sits at the right hand of Yahweh till his enemies are made his footstool, — would encourage riff-raff to be associated with him. "This fellow welcomes sinners" and worse still, he breaks all the rules and makes himself so familiar that he actually eats with them.

Now, this truth is familiar to those of us who've been welcomed and eat regularly with him. Yet, we still feel the weight of sin like a black cloud hovering over us, and we hardly dare to believe that Jesus still receives sinners. We believe that Jesus will look for some good in us, demand some redeeming trait in character, some act of penance, some holy resolution, something that will mitigate guilt; but the truth that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them, needs to be proclaimed over and over again, that those who don't believe may one day know his love and be healed.

JESUS WELCOMES SINNERS! It's extraordinary that Jesus permits sinners to gather and draw near to hear him. Many with academic pride find unlearned people disdainful, but Jesus speaks by Wisdom in the Proverbs, and says, "Let all who are simple come to my house!" To those who have no sense she [Wisdom] says, "Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed" [9:4-5]. Jesus invites the simple to come and learn at his feet. Moral teachers have always selected their followers, and have thought it degrading to share their imagined pearls of wisdom with the sinful crowd. But Jesus welcomes sinners. Whatever others may do, Jesus, beyond all other teachers however gentle and compassionate — welcomes sinners.

When Jesus has cleansed sinners, he welcomes them as disciples and friends. Jesus permits the guilty, the once profane, corrupt, and formerly depraved, to associate themselves with him, to wear his name, to sit in his house, to be written in the Book of Life. He makes them participants of his affliction, that they may share with him in his glory. Jesus welcomes pardoned sinners into friendship.

Dear, dear Saints, there are none so precious in Jesus' sight as the sinners for whom he died. When Jesus welcomes sinners, he opens the golden gates of his own heart, and absorbs the sinner right into himself. He admits the sinner into personal union with himself, and makes the sinner a member of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.

“This fellow welcomes sinners;” to pardon their sins, to justify them, to cleanse their hearts by the Holy Spirit, to preserve their souls by his indwelling, to lead them on from strength to strength, to enable them to serve him, praise him, and have communion with him, and to enjoy his love— “This man welcomes sinners” at last to reign with him in glory everlasting, where sin is no more.

Jesus, who towers above all others, holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners— this man welcomes sinners. This man, who is none other than the eternal God, before whom angels veil their faces— this man welcomes sinners. Only an angel's tongue can describe this mighty condescension of love. That the offended God, against whom all transgression had been committed — that he should take upon himself the form of a servant, indeed a slave, and bear the sin of many, and should then as man be willing to receive the vilest of the vile, and blot out their transgressions and iniquities— is astonishing. It's the greatest wonder in heaven and on earth. There's nothing like the truth that, ‘The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us’ (John 1:14); that he who lives sacrificed himself for sinners; and having made atonement for sin, now welcomes the very chief of sinners into his heart's love, and calls them his friends.

And once Jesus welcomes sinners, brings them into his love, and calls them friends, he does the most endearing thing possible. HE FEASTS WITH THEM! He feasts with them at their table and they with him at his table; wherever that table may be laid. We become intertwined with Jesus when we join in Holy Communion; privileged a foretaste of the fulness of his glory to come. There's nothing that Jesus Christ won't give to sinners. They'll be crowned; they'll have harps of gold; they'll dwell in the many mansions surrounding God himself. Jesus welcomes sinners, and eats with them; receives them into the soul and wonder of Christian life and privilege.

Maybe some of you here this morning struggle to dare to believe that this isn't all just a fairy-tale. Maybe life has dumped such a pall of smoke over you that it's hard to see or believe that Christ is so real, so true, so wonderful as to accept you as you are and has great things in store for you. Dear sinner and saint, trust in Jesus and you are saved. May the Holy Spirit help you to trust him now! Believe me, I know your sense of unworthiness; I know your doubts and fears; I know your pain. But Jesus sets no conditions; rather, Jesus welcomes sinners into his warm, loving, beating heart. Feel it's pulse, follow its lure, and run to his embrace, sinner. If you are rejected, come and tell me immediately. I would never intentionally preach a lying gospel: If anyone can prove to me that Jesus Christ doesn't welcome sinners, then next Sunday I'll preach that the gospel has failed and leave the ministry. We all know that's not going to happen because God isn't a liar and I'll never knowingly speak falsely of him.

Try the Lord Jesus, sinners all, and taste and see that the Lord is good. Come to Jesus now! Come as you are! You don't need not drop to your knees and pray; one look with a believing eye will instantly be met with his welcoming smile. 'Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other' (Isaiah 45:22). That's Jesus' invitation to his eternal banquet. May Jesus fill your hearts with joy and your bellies with the prime cuts of creation; the fat of the lamb, the fruits and grains of the tree and stem, and a full-bodied red of the vine to wash it all down. May Jesus enter into your hearts by his Spirit; may you be led to him, and may we praise him together, world without end. Jesus does indeed welcome sinners and eats with them. Amen.

And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.