

6.17.2018 Trinity 3 (Luke 15:1-10)

*“Then drew near unto Him all the publicans and sinners for to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them”* (Luke 15:1-2).

The Gospels continuously portray the Pharisees and scribes (as well as the chief priests, the elders, and the Sadducees) as Jesus’ opponents. There are a few exceptions, but generally speaking these are the men who resisted Him at every turn. These religious authorities criticized Jesus and His disciples for failure to keep the Law and for associating with sinners. In reply, Jesus challenged their authority, called them hypocrites, accused them of leading the people astray, and turned their world upside down by proclaiming a kingdom in which the unclean is clean and the unlawful is lawful. From the limited perspective of His opponents, Jesus was quickly regarded to be a threat to their position as the ecclesiastical rulers of the people, and as time passed, they began to view Him as someone who could bring about the destruction of the entire nation.

This view was expressed by Caiaphas, the High Priest, when he made this prophetic statement while speaking to the chief priests and the Pharisees. Caiaphas said to them, *“You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish”* (John 11:49-50 ESV). In this statement, Caiaphas spoke the truth that he did not intend to speak. The message that he was trying to convey was simply his view that they must have Jesus put to death if they are to keep their positions of authority and preserve their nation from Roman destruction. This lie is all that he intended to speak, but from our perspective we see the prophetic, and most important truth in his words. It is better, and infinitely desirable, that Jesus should die for that people, and for us, that He may save us from perishing.

Caiaphas unknowingly spoke the truth of the Gospel, and in the passage we read this morning the murmuring Pharisees and scribes unintentionally did likewise when they said, *“This man receives sinners, and eats with them.”* Their intent was to call Him *“a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners”* (Matthew 11:19), but their words betrayed them, and

these grumbling men who were experts in the Law proved themselves to be experts in the Gospel, though they were too blinded by their self-righteous pride to recognize it. Still, they proclaimed the good news found in our Gospel reading today: Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, receives sinners, and eats with them! This is the unimaginable truth of our Lord's Gospel, the truth that we humbly and thankfully participate in this morning.

The Pharisees and scribes didn't recognize the real truth in the words they murmured, and so our Lord taught them by using three parables, two of which are found in today's Gospel reading. The three parables He shared: The parable of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son are in a sense only one parable told in three different ways, for the major themes are clearly presented and common to each story. In each of these parables something or someone of great value has been lost, in each parable there is a Seeker who finds the lost, and in each parable there is great joy in finding that which was lost. These parables were originally addressed to the Pharisees and scribes and are intended to show how wrong they were to grumble and complain about Jesus receiving sinners and eating with them, and though these words were spoken to them, they are written for our benefit and learning.

You may have noticed that there is often a tendency for people inside the walls of the Church to act like those Pharisees and scribes. Church members have been known to murmur or grumble just like Jonah did when God showed His mercy and compassion for the wicked people of Ninevah. Pride creeps in, and we deceive ourselves with the thought that we are one of the nine coins which was not lost, or one of the ninety-nine obedient sheep who remained with the Shepherd. Such pride and self-deception separates us from Jesus, who came down from heaven to receive sinners and to eat with them. In this fallen world our Lord calls the sinner to His table, otherwise He would be dining alone (Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:8). If we make the grave error of viewing ourselves as the coin that never fell from the woman's purse, or the lovable, ever-faithful sheep who never left the flock, then we are in a very real sense, truly lost, for we have rejected the only One in which we can be found.

Jesus used these parables, and He uses them still, as an invitation to humility

and repentance. They are designed to eliminate self-righteous pride and help each one of us realize that we are the foolish, wandering sheep who the Good Shepherd gently laid on His shoulder and carried home, rejoicing. We are the precious coin that the poor woman searched for so diligently, and when she found it, celebrated so joyfully with her friends and neighbors. Our Lord calls us to such humility and repentance to the end that we may be those who join Him at His Table, where we participate in Holy Communion, a heavenly feast of His Body and Blood for forgiveness, salvation, and everlasting life.

The simple and glorious message of the Gospel this morning is this: Jesus receives sinners, and eats with them. He is the One who came “*to seek and to save that which was lost*” (Luke 19:10), and His desire is to share this meal with you. This heavenly feast that no one deserves, yet He offers to all who call upon His Holy name. So come to the Table, your Savior’s arms are open wide, and He, with the Father and the Spirit, “with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven” is rejoicing over you, the sinner who once was lost, but now is found through the precious Blood of Jesus Christ.