

One aspect of the great wisdom and glory of Our Lord's consistent use of parables is the ready reminders one receives of the kingdom of God throughout one's life. A wedding becomes a reminder of the love of God for us, and of the joy that awaits us at the wedding feast of heaven. Discovering some uncommon treasure at a thrift store or a yard sale should remind us of the pearl of great price which is life in Christ worthy of any sacrifice to be attained. Even the birds of the air and the flowers of the fields are testimonies to God's care and provision for us. Our gospel lesson today contains two parables about the searching which God does for those who are lost. And so even as one is tearing the house apart looking for lost keys, the intensity of one's searching and the desperation one feels in those moments, really ought to be encouragements. For, Our Lord says, this is beginning to get at the intensity and fervor of his search for the lost soul. God seeks the restoration of the wayward sinner with more persistence and drive than we are able to express in our searches. And this is no small comfort for those of us who are conscious of our own propensity for sin. But also this is a comfort to those of us who have family members who are straying away from God. A relative who is a wayward sheep or a lost coin can be the source of great sorrow. However, recall that God is seeking them. Recall that however serious you are about recovering a lost wallet, pet or even keys, that God is so very much more serious about the recovery of those who have fallen away.

But let us take a step back and consider this gospel account more fully. Throughout Christ's ministry on earth he drew in the poor, the desolate, and even the sinners - those who had taken up jobs or positions in society which were known to be sinful. This is a significant shift into our own time. There is not, in our day and age, the social class - sinner. Perhaps the closest we get in our own culture is addict. The drug or alcohol addict can often be readily identified. However, otherwise the sinners amongst us are generally more subtle. However, in Christ's time there were those who were generally and publically known as sinners. These included the publicans, or tax collectors, and the prostitutes. Both of these jobs functioned as brands. These people are sinners. There were certainly others also in the community who were known for a particular sin which they had committed, and, whether because that sin was particularly grievous or repeated, were thus cast amongst the other sinners.

This social group, the sinners. Was cut off from the spiritual life of the community. They were seen as unclean, and not to be interacted with. And so, the religious leaders react negatively to Christ's willingness to minister and fellowship among them. "This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them." An earlier expression of their disdain and discontent had elicited Christ's explanation, 'They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance' (Lk v. 30); and now their continued negative reactions are the motive of the three parables which follow - the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin and also the parable of the prodigal son. In all of these Christ would shame these murmurers, holding up to them the angels of God, and God Himself, rejoicing at the conversion of a sinner; and contrasting the joy of

heaven with their envy and pride. Heaven and its holy inhabitants welcomed the penitent; only his fellow-sinners kept him proudly aloof, as though they were wronged if he were freely forgiven.

But this is not all. Not merely was there joy in heaven over the penitent sinner, but more joy over one such than over ninety-nine such as themselves. This is the mystery which we find in our gospel lesson. Not only is Christ's project to minister to the otherwise lost, to heal the sick. But this ministry is of greater value than all the righteousness of the pharisees and all those who were otherwise righteous. One is given the impression that there is more joy in the recovery of something lost than there would be if the loss had never occurred. St. Augustine beautifully describes this phenomenon:

*'What then takes place in the soul, when it is more delighted at finding or recovering the things it loves, than if it had ever had them? Yea and other things witness hereunto, and all things are full of witnesses, crying out, "So it is." The conquering commander triumpheth; yet had not conquered, unless he had fought, and the more peril there was in battle, so much the more joy is there in the triumph. The storm tosses the sailors, threatens shipwreck; all wax pale at approaching death; sky and sea are calmed, and they are exceeding joyed, as having been exceeding afraid. A friend is sick, and his pulse threatens danger; all who long for his recovery are sick in mind with him. He is restored, though as yet he walks not with his former strength, yet there is such joy as was not when before he walked sound and strong.'*

So it is that we have greater joy in the recovery of a thing than if it had never been lost. But is this what Christ is describing of Heaven? Is it true that there is more delight in heaven over repentant sin than there is in faithful worship? Surely, this begins to sound as though the early heretics were right all along. Why not sin that grace may abound all the more. If heaven has more joy in the grace given to the sinner, why not sin?

The answer to these questions is severalfold.

First, it must be noted that Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees' pride. The Pharisees had come to believe that it was their righteousness which pleased God. They saw themselves as the truest of God's people and the purest source of Joy in the divine. Jesus is challenging that notion. Their supposed righteousness is not what brings God joy. It is the repentance of a lost soul which delights the heavens. In turning their back on the sinners, the Pharisees have, in fact, precluded themselves from participation in the joy of heaven. There is perhaps no more consistent moral teaching in all the gospels than the need for humiility. The parable of the Pharisee and Publican at prayer, the parable of the seating at a banquet, the washing of the disciples' feet, the first shall be last, have a childlike faith, praising the faith of the Roman centurion who said, "Lord I am not worthy that you should enter my roof." Over and over again, Jesus presents the need for humility to his followers, and models it in his own life. St. Peter, in our epistle lesson presents a reason why this is such a focus. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. God works against the proud, but aids and restores the humble.

The pharisees stand in the place of pride. They look upon the sinners with disdain and disgust. They see themselves as unstained by sin. Yet, their sin of pride places them in much greater danger than the sinners who have come to Christ.

And this is the second reason Jesus emphasizes the joy of heaven over the repentant sinner. It is only pride that sees oneself as secure of the ninety-nine righteous. If we are honest in humility, we recognize that we are ever being drawn away by temptations. We are constantly being recovered by Christ. Our daily offices appoint times of confession every morning and every evening, because we need to be repenting even more often than that. And so, for us in the church – for the faithful christian – this joy over the lost sheep does not exclude us. This should be a great comfort to us. Each time that we repent from our sin we are rejoiced over by the angels in heaven. Each time we turn away from the vices which beset us, there is joy. Do not grow tired of repentance, for the angels certainly don't grow tired of celebrating. If you find yourself caught up in a sin which has beset you many times before, do not despair, repent again, and heaven will delight over your recovery.

However, let us not then think that sin is irresistible. For the Epistle lesson reminds us that we are not tempted beyond what is common to man, and the grace of God will carry us through. As the good priest John Keble has written, "Like to this comfort which sick men receive, in the distressing thought, that no one was ever ill as they are, is the comfort which the holy Apostle here offers to the souls of sinful men in temptation and distress. *"Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world."* As if he had said, "I am not ignorant how you feel, when temptations and trials come upon you. I know it comes over your mind continually, Surely no one ever was tempted exactly as I am; surely my trials, and burthens are more intolerable than men commonly endure." When the persecution of the heathen comes on, then, S. Peter seems to say, then each one of you will be inclined to think his own share in it worse than that of all others. With that imagination, the devil would slacken your resistance, would make you less hearty and earnest in standing firm against all that he can do. He goeth about the fold, like a roaring lion prowling about, seeking whom he may devour, which of the lambs he may find straying. But be not you moved by him; set your faces steadily against him, knowing that the same trouble, or quite as bad, has to be endured by your brethren, scattered, as you are, among the heathen." We are thus encouraged by our lessons today to humbly recognize that we are ever in need of God's saving grace, but that he does give such grace that we are not overcome. Let this parable be an encouragement to us to search out the sins in our lives which draw us away from God, and turn from those sins. And let the faithfulness of the great cloud of witnesses be for us an encouragement to repentance from sin and the strength to resist temptation from the first.

Finally, this rejoicing over a penitent sinner is also a source of joy for the faithful Christian, because we are invited to participate in it. The joy over the penitent sinner is shared in by the 99 faithful sheep. In both

parables, friends and neighbors are invited to rejoice with the saviour who has recovered that which was lost. We in the church are among the friends and neighbors of almighty God. We are now sons of God and co-heirs with Christ. And so the joy of heaven over penitent sinner, is often the joy of the church, as well. We also are given to rejoice in the growing of the kingdom of God. If we do not stand aloof as the Pharisees did, we will be drawn up into the rejoicing over the return of a wayward soul.

This is why Our Lord places so great emphasis on the joy of heaven over the gracious return of the sinner. First, to rebuke the pride of those who imagine themselves as righteous and pleasing to God in themselves, second to encourage those who recognize the constant fight against sin in their own lives, and finally to remind the faithful to rejoice along with heaven in the glory of God's grace. This is the call to all of us in the church – to have such great esteem of God's grace that we are always calling upon it for ourselves and rejoicing in it in the lives of those around us.