

6.16.2024 Trinity 3 (St. Luke 15:1-10)

Pelagius was a monk and teacher who historians believe was born in Britain and came to Rome around the year 380. While he was in Rome, Pelagius attracted a number of followers because he was well-educated, had an extensive knowledge of Holy Scripture, and was a man of truly remarkable holiness and virtue. In regards to the virtuous way he lived, it would seem that his own progress in the Christian life gave Pelagius a passion for the complete moral purity of not just some, but all who profess and call themselves Christians.

The righteous, holy lives that Pelagius and his followers lived often stood in contrast to that of many cultural Christians in his day. This fact distressed him, and Pelagius set out to find the cause of this apparent disregard for living a holy life. What he came up with, the primary cause from his point of view, was the Church's teaching about the weakness of fallen human nature, the doctrine that true righteousness and holiness can only be achieved with God's help, by His grace. A prayer written by St. Augustine was at the center of this disagreement between Pelagius and Church teaching, a prayer that asks God to: "Grant what Thou commandest, and command what Thou dost desire."

Pelagius disagreed entirely with the first part of that prayer: "Grant what Thou commandest." He disagreed with the thought that a person would need God to give us His grace in order that we may be obedient to His commands. Instead, Pelagius insisted that it was possible for every human being to avoid sin, and to live a life of perfect righteousness, by their own human effort, without the grace of God. He put forth the argument that we are all born in a state of righteousness, and as creatures made in the "*image and likeness*" of God (Genesis 1:26-27), we are fully capable, at all times, in all places, and on our own - fully capable of living righteous, holy lives.

On the other side of this disagreement, the Church and St. Augustine spoke about the Fall of mankind, and the way our first parents' sinful disobedience in the Garden corrupted human nature, leaving us "very far gone from original righteousness" (Article IX), or to use the words of St. Paul, apart from grace, the flesh and spirit are now in conflict with one another, "*so that*

we cannot do the things that we would” (Galatians 5:17). Augustine spoke in those terms as well, referring to the human will after the Fall as being a captive free will, saying that it is only by God’s grace that we can possess a liberated free will - a will set free from the bondage of sin by Divine grace so powerful, so effectual, that we actually become a “*new creation*” in Christ. Indeed, by the grace of God, “*The old things have passed away; behold, the new has come*” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Pelagius was a man of great virtue. Even St. Augustine described him as “a holy man, who, I am told, has made no small progress in the Christian life,” but Pelagianism, the belief that the sin of our first parents did not corrupt our human nature, and that we, on our own, apart from the grace of God, can achieve human perfection, these things that Pelagius taught have been condemned by more Church councils than any other heresy. Those things Pelagius taught have been condemned, but Church doctrine, and the prayers of Augustine and others that center on the necessity of grace are still being offered today.

Consider the words of the Collect we prayed this morning: “O LORD, we beseech thee mercifully to hear us; and grant that we, to whom thou hast given an hearty desire to pray, may, by thy mighty aid, be defended and comforted in all dangers and adversities...” In this prayer we ask God to defend and comfort us, and we thank God, not only for the gracious gift of prayer, but for the grace that instills in us a desire to pray. This Collect acknowledges the fact that prayer begins and ends in grace. The desire to pray doesn’t come from us, it comes from God, and the answer to our prayer isn’t realized by our own human ability, but by the grace, mercy, and love of God.

Consider the words of the Collect we prayed two weeks ago: “O GOD, the strength of all those who put their trust in thee; Mercifully accept our prayers; and because, through the weakness of our mortal nature, we can do no good thing without thee, grant us the help of thy grace...” In this prayer we acknowledge the eternal truth that God is our strength, the fact that human nature is weak and unable to do good without Him, and therefore we pray for the “help of thy grace.” Day after day our liturgical prayers echo the prayer of St. Augustine. We continually ask God to “Grant what Thou commandest.”

God, give us, by Your grace, the Divine help we so desperately need to know You, love You, and serve You in this world, that we may be happy with You forever in heaven (Baltimore Catechism).

Our Lord is, as St. Peter wrote in the Epistle today, *“the God of all grace...”* (1 Peter 5:10), and the parables we read this morning clearly illustrate that truth as we continue to reflect on the fact that we are entirely reliant on His grace. The Parable of the Lost Sheep, and the Parable of the Lost Coin, both emphasize the necessity of God’s grace in our redemption. In these parables we recognize that it is not the lost who seek God, it is God who seeks the lost. A sheep wanders aimlessly, never moving closer, but always further and further away from the fellowship of the flock, and the protection of the Good Shepherd. A coin lays in a dark, dusty corner of the room. Unable to move. Unable to call out for help. On its own, completely incapable of returning to its former state. Without the grace of God, like lost sheep and lost coins, we are bound to either wander further away from the love of God, or to simply lay motionless in the dark, dusty corners of this world. Contrary to that which Pelagius taught, in our fallen condition we cannot return to God, we must be found by God, and just imagine what that means to each of us as we gather together in His house this morning.

A lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost child of God - found. The gracious love of God doesn’t lose sight of one sheep in a hundred, one coin in ten, or one child in this world. Grace carried you and I into His house, grace gave us the desire to pray, grace called us to repentance, grace paid the price of forgiveness, and grace will be broken and poured out, given and received this morning through the Sacrament of our Lord’s Body and Blood.

“Rejoice with me,” said the Shepherd, *“for I have found my sheep which was lost.”* *“Rejoice with me,”* said the woman, *“for I have found the piece which I had lost.”* *“Rejoice with Me,”* declares the Father, for this my child *“was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found”* (Luke 15:1-31).