

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

ANNO ✚ DOMINI 2023

“Savior of Sinners”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“This man receives sinners and eats with them.” That’s what the Pharisees and scribes muttered under their breath when they saw the tax collectors and sinners all drawing near to hear Jesus.¹ This is not how they thought the Messiah would deal with sinners. The Law is very clear: God says to Moses on Mount Sinai, “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments.”² The Law teaches that God is good and kind to those who are *faithful* in keeping His commandments, not to evildoers who disobey Him. “Therefore,” Luther says in the Close of the Commandments section of the Small Catechism, “we should fear [God’s] wrath and not do anything against them. But He promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments. Therefore, we should also love and trust in Him and gladly do what He commands.”

This is just what the Pharisees and scribes worked so hard to do. They taught and sacrificed in the temple at Jerusalem, earnestly tried to live a pristine life of outward piety, and were so honored in the eyes of the people that even Jesus says things like, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”³ And because the Law states that God is angry with sinners and will not receive them, they also assumed that the Messiah would be just as holy in His conduct and associate with holy people, like the scribes and Pharisees. Instead, they see Him spending time with the *unholy*, e.g., tax collectors, adulterers, just the worst sort of people you can imagine. This did not compute.

What these men failed to understand is that there are *two* great teachings of the Bible. The Law, which tells us what we are to do and not to do, is one of them. But the Gospel, which is quite different from the Law, is the other. And

¹ Luke 15:1-2.

² Exodus 20:5-6.

³ Matthew 5:20.

rather than simply *tell* the Pharisees and scribes what the Gospel is, as He told Nicodemus, for example, saying, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him,”⁴ He *shows* them with two parables: “What man of you,” He says, “having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost’...Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’”⁵

Jesus is comparing Himself with the man and the woman, and the tax collectors and sinners are the lost sheep and lost coin. In fact, just a few chapters later, Jesus will visit the house of a tax collector named Zacchaeus and say, “Today salvation has come to this house...For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”⁶ Earlier in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus forgave a sinful woman who came and washed His feet with her tears.⁷ Yes, the Law demands perfection. Yes, God threatens to punish all who break His commandments. But the saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to *save* sinners.⁸ God sent His Son into the world to *redeem* the world, that is, to purchase and win poor miserable sinners with His holy, precious blood, shed on the cross. Jesus innocently suffered and died in our stead, satisfying God’s wrath for sin, that whoever repents and believes in this Good News will be saved from the condemnation they justly deserve. That’s why Jesus received sinners and ate with them: they were His, His purchases, bought and paid for at a price more costly than a sheep or a coin. He showed a deep concern for them, just as you or I would show deep concern for something we had paid for and lost. It happens all the time. We know *exactly* what that’s like, and so we know something of what it’s like for God to lose one of His children. God desires all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God,

⁴ John 3:17.

⁵ Luke 15:3-6, 8-9.

⁶ Luke 19:9, 10.

⁷ Luke 7:36-50.

⁸ 1 Timothy 1:15.

and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all.⁹

Not only that, but there is joy over one sinner who repents, more than over ninety-nine who require no repentance. Jesus says this twice, that the angels in heaven rejoice greatly over one sinner who repents. I used to think that Jesus was being sarcastic here, speaking of those who merely *think* they need no repentance, i.e., the self-righteous. But the more I think about it, the more I think Jesus means exactly what He says. The ninety-nine are His sheep, too, after all. They're a part of His flock. The only difference is they haven't gone astray. They're still a bunch of sheep, mind you. They still need rest and guidance and protection. But they're not like the sheep that's gone astray. They're *not lost*. This would be, I suppose, the equivalent of those who hear the Word of God and receive the Sacrament faithfully and do their best to live according to God's Word. They're not perfect—far from it!—but they're not lost, either. They're right where they're supposed to be. And for that the angels in heaven rejoice.

But not as much as when one of those sheep goes astray and returns safely to the fold. Think of a mother who has several children and one of them gets sick. She will spend more time with that one child in order to see him back to health. But that doesn't mean she loves her other children less. In fact, she would do the same for any of them. "Those who are well have no need of a physician," says Jesus, "but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."¹⁰ Ninety-nine out of a hundred ain't bad, but Jesus has a special place in His heart for those who wander away. They're still His treasured possession. So, where we might shrug and count our losses, He is determined to regain what is His. He seeks diligently, pursuing us into the dirtiest corners of our lives, that our adversary the devil might not devour us.¹¹

Which means that we need not be afraid of confessing our sins. We are, I think, but we shouldn't be. We, too, forget about the Gospel, thinking only in terms of the Law. We forget that while the Law shows our sin, the Gospel shows our Savior, Jesus Christ, who pardons iniquity and passes over transgression for the remnant of His inheritance, which is us. He doesn't retain His anger forever, because He delights in showing steadfast love. He will again have compassion on

⁹ 1 Timothy 2:4-6.

¹⁰ Luke 5:31-32.

¹¹ 1 Peter 5:8.

us; He will tread out iniquities underfoot. He will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.¹² So, instead of trying so hard to maintain this veneer of holiness, thinking that's what God wants, we should strive to be more like the tax collectors and sinners, who were not ashamed to draw near to hear Jesus. And not because He condoned their sin, not because He gave them permission to sin that grace may abound,¹³ but because He brought their sin to light, showed them the error of their ways, and then forgave them, took their sin away, laid it on His shoulders, and rejoiced with all the angels in heaven as He welcomed His lost sheep home.

Jesus is the Savior of sinners. So, if you're a sinner, rejoice: Jesus came for you. If you are lost, repent and believe in the Gospel. Turn away from your sin and draw near to be forgiven. And if you're where you're supposed to be, do not grumble at those who have gone far astray. Rather, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, for He cares for you, too. For this man receives sinners and eats with them.

In ☩ Jesus' name. Amen.

SDG

¹² Micah 7:18.

¹³ Romans 6:1.