

Rev. Danny Mackey
Third Sunday after Trinity
July 3, 2022
Luke 15:1-10
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

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

And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

"Love the sinner; hate the sin." Well, that's rather difficult, isn't it? After all, the two go together. It's sinners who do the sinning. Also, when the Bible teaches us that God punishes sin, it means He punishes sinners. As the Catechism explains, "God threatens to punish all who break these Commandments. Therefore, we should fear His wrath and not do anything against them." God punishes sinners. It isn't easy separating sins from sinners. The Psalmist says, "Do not I hate them, O Lord, who hate you? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies" (Ps 139:21-22).

Separating sins from sinners isn't just difficult—it's impossible for us to do! Really, all we can do is destroy the sinner along with his sin. They call prisons "penitentiaries" as if a prison will turn a criminal into a penitent who will crave redemption. The bitter fact is that prisons don't separate sins from sinners. Rather, they serve as breeding grounds for new and inventive ways of sinning. The only way we can separate sins from sinners is by getting rid of the sinners. We can put them away from us. We can put them to death. But we can't go inside of them and tear out the sin and replace it with goodness.

But religious folks try to do just that. So they come up with religious schemes that will supposedly make sinners into saints. The Pharisees were masters at that. They knew what God demanded in the Law of Moses. They had read everything Moses wrote about what we should and should not do. They came up with 613 commandments. 248 of them were positive requirements and 365 were negative prohibitions. But that wasn't all. They proceeded to go beyond these commandments to, as they would say, "make a hedge" around them. They put together a system that would keep anyone who followed it from ever breaking a single one of those 613 commandments. This "hedge" around the Law included, for example, 39 different categories of things you couldn't do on the Sabbath. It was, in their opinion, a reasonably foolproof way of avoiding any kind of sin. The Pharisees

sincerely believed that they were avoiding sin by following the hundreds of rules and regulations that governed their lives.

The Scribes were those who studied the Scriptures. They spent hours copying the Bible. In those days, hundreds of years before the invention of the printing press, every single copy of the Bible was painstakingly written by hand. These men knew the text of the Bible. They knew that God can't tolerate sin. God punishes sin. And that means that God can't tolerate sinners.

So now comes Jesus. He receives sinners. He joins them. He eats with them. He makes Himself at home with them. What's going on here? This is intolerable! The Pharisees and the Scribes can't tolerate Jesus because, in their mind, if Jesus were truly a holy man, He'd separate Himself from sin. How can He be separating himself from sin when He has fellowship with sinners? How can this be? They said it couldn't be done—shouldn't there be a hedge around Jesus and these sinners? So they complained about Jesus: "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

Well, they were right about that! Jesus did receive sinners and eat with them. But they were dead wrong in their criticism of Him. Jesus was doing what their religion couldn't do. He was separating sins from sinners. What He could do they couldn't. And they hated Him because He could do what they couldn't do. That's why they hated Him. That's why they sought His death. That's why they plotted against Him with the religious leaders. They hated the One who could do what they couldn't do, namely separate sins from sinners.

You can't separate sins from sinners by teaching sinners how to avoid sin. Sinners can't somehow escape their sinful condition, though they try. Escapism is found in lies and deceits, books and movies, video games and role-playing, booze and drugs and sex. But no matter what you do, you'll never get away from you. You can pop as many pills as you want, you can pretend all you want, you can drink and drink and drink... and you'll still be old, sinful you. This is a fact that even the heathen can recognize. And they do, believe me. No matter what you do, you'll never get away from you.

Have you ever talked to somebody who went out and had himself a so-called "born again" experience and became insufferably pious and impossible to deal with? You may know the type. He used to do all sorts of disgusting things, but now he's different. Why, now he's "born again" and doesn't sin anymore. But when you look carefully at this fellow you

notice that he's the same fellow he used to be. He hasn't gotten away from himself. It's the same old sinner dressed up in pious, new clothes. Entire denominations are based on this. In fact, the world headquarters is just down the street from my house.

And this is the popular image of what repentance is all about. It's the idea that somebody has a change of life, an experience that's rather dramatic and compelling and obvious to the world. But that's not what repentance is. And that's not what these parables of Jesus describe. Repentance isn't about a dramatic outward change that the world can see. Repentance is about an inner change. It's a change that only God can see. It's true enough that the Bible calls for the fruits of repentance. St. John the Baptist preached against the hypocrites who came to him with a sham display of repentance:

But when [John] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees.

Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Oh, yes, God condemns most severely a sham, hypocritical repentance. But true repentance isn't produced by the fruit it bears. Let's not put the cart before the horse—the fruit is produced by true repentance. If we're to be concerned about the new life that the lost sheep will live, we must first be concerned about the lost sheep being found. When it's lost, the sheep can do nothing but stay lost. It's not able to find its way home. The parable of the lost coin that follows the parable of the lost sheep drives this point home quite clearly. What can a coin do? It's an inanimate object. It can't do a thing. It can only lay there hidden under the rag in the corner. It does nothing but remain lost.

The lost sheep is lost because of his own fault. And the Shepherd goes out and finds it. And here's the wonder of it all. By being carried home on the shepherd's shoulders, the sheep is no longer lost. Think of that. By being carried home on the shepherd's shoulders, the lost sheep is found. By the sin of the sinner being carried, the lost sinner is found.

The lost sinner's not separated from his sin by obeying a list of rules. The sinner's separated from his sin only by the Shepherd bearing that sin. There's no other way. When

Jesus ate with them and drank with them and joined their company, He was going in among them in order to take off them the burden of their sin. And there was only one way that Jesus could take that burden off them. He had to take it on Himself. That's just what He did.

Jesus speaks to us very specific words. He doesn't talk to us in general terms about how God is loving or how God is forgiving or how there's a new life somewhere, somehow, some day. No, Jesus gives us God's love by taking on Himself the hatred that God feels against all sins and sinners. Jesus, according to St. Paul, was made to "be sin for us." Jesus takes it off us by becoming that sin and being rejected on the cross. Jesus gives forgiveness to us. But it's in a very specific way: He sheds His blood for us. Then He gives His body and blood to us in the Lord's Supper. We join Him at His Table. We eat and drink with Him. In this way, He lets us know in no uncertain terms that we aren't lost any more. We are found.

Only God can separate sins from a sinner. It's got to be done. If not, the sinner dies. The sheep must be found. If he isn't found, he dies. There's no question about that. A sheep lost in the desert hasn't got a prayer. Or maybe that's all he has. He bleats in a pathetic fashion. The Shepherd hears and comes and rescues him.

But the rules that are constructed to provide that hedge around the Law to keep folks from sinning are a trap worse than anything out in the desert. The trap of works righteousness is the deadliest trap of all. You think you are separating yourself from sin, but you're instead embracing the sin, taking it deep within you, and you're dying and you don't know it. You're looking to the religious rules as your lifeline but they're sheer death and hell. Your rules that you think are keeping you on the straight and narrow are instead sending you straight to hell.

And do you know why? Because your rules teach you not only to hate the sinner, but they teach you to hate the One who takes the sin away. That's a fact. When you trust in what you do in obedience to the rules, you don't trust in Jesus. You're despising Him. You're hating Him. And you're hating those whom He seeks and saves.

We have been found. Not because we're so smart. If we were smart, we wouldn't have been lost. We've been rescued by the One who bore our sin. He bore our load. He carried us out of the trouble we created. We were trapped and couldn't get out. He picked us up and put us on His shoulders. The angels rejoiced to see it. And they rejoice every time they see it. And so do the children of God.

Jesus separates sin from sinners by bearing the sin. Then He comes to the sinners and gives what He won when He bore their sin: forgiveness. This is what we come to church to receive; and Jesus keeps on giving it in our need. We rejoice to receive it even as we rejoice when others receive it with us, and so we rejoice with the angels in heaven. And we remain in fellowship with God, with the angels and archangels, and with the dear Christian saints who are with them in heaven. This is a fellowship that will never end. It'll continue into eternity where pure love and pure peace will replace every evil desire and every unkind judgment and every memory of sin. This is what our Lord Jesus has given to us, and this is why we love Him and why we rejoice whenever anyone who is lost is found.

In Jesus' name

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ + Jesus.