

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.”

Those words of the introit are the words of a repentant sinner. They are the words of a Christian, one who has sorrow over his sin and trusts in Christ to save him. This is a wonderful thing in the sight of God and something he reveals to you today that he takes great delight in as your God, and you also share in this joy. Jesus makes this clear in the Gospel reading today. “Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Consider this, then, and what this means for you. Christians find and have joy when sinners repent.

The words of the Old Testament reading are beautiful and give you insight into the very heart of God. “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love.” Think about that for a moment. What does God delight in? He delights in steadfast love. God delights in showing you mercy. He delights in forgiving you. He has great delight in saving you in Christ. That’s what Jesus is teaching the people in the reading and what he proclaims to you as well as you listen to these two parables and the following parable after our reading which is the prodigal son.

When you see and understand that about God and who he is, then, there’s great absurdity in the minds and hearts of the people at the beginning of the reading. Listen again to what St. Luke recorded for you, “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” These people are upset that Jesus is eating with sinners. They are upset he came to talk with them and preach to them. Really, they are mad he came to save sinners. They are self-righteous which is to say they really have no righteousness before God.

Now, let’s pause for a second and clarify something. Nowhere does it say, “Jesus affirms or tolerates sin.” That’s what often, though, due to our sinful hearts, the sinful world, and the devil want us to read into a statement like this in the Gospels. Yet, never does Jesus approve of sin nor does he ignore it and refuse to address it. That would not only defeat the purpose for which he came to redeem his people but would make him a liar when he calls people to repentance; to turn from their sin. Sin is a problem, a real deadly problem and condition that rightly stands under God’s wrath and punishment. Jesus himself said earlier in Luke 5, in fact to the Pharisees who said something almost identical to this statement in our Gospel reading which is ten chapters later in Luke 15. In Luke 5 it is written, “And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’ And Jesus answered them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.’” Jesus associated with sinners to call them to repentance because he came to save them. When he associated with sinners, he taught them and preached to them.

Now, bringing this up again to Jesus, he answered them. But how did he do this? Well, he did it with these three parables in Luke 15 to teach them about repentance and to teach them about who God is, who, by the way, they are rejecting by their self-righteousness and failing to see the Lord who has shown them mercy and is in their midst before their faces. Notice then what Luke wrote inspired by the Holy Spirit, that Jesus did in answer to the charge and accusation of the Pharisees against Jesus.

So he [Jesus] told them this parable: “What man of you, 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.’ Just so, I tell you,

there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

Repentance is a big topic in the Scriptures and is used in a broad and a narrow sense in a few nuanced ways. Generally, though, the broad sense of the term is seen in relation to conversation, when someone is turned by God through the word from unbelief to faith. The narrow sense typically means from turning from sin and to the new righteous life God has given in Christ. Permeating through all of this can be seen how the Lutheran Confessions rightly define repentance from the Scriptures as “contrition and faith.” There is sorrow or terror over sin and faith which trust in the Lord who forgives you and you have what he gives.

God rejoices when a sinner repents. God has joy when he called you by name in the waters of Holy Baptism. God rejoices when you turn from your sin. God rejoices when you go through life turning to him, trusting in him, praying to him, and living as he has called you to be. There’s great joy in the life of a Christian.

A fascinating detail included in this parable about the lost sheep is expanded upon in the second parable about the lost coin. Again, Jesus said, “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.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

That’s something to think about right now as you listen to the words of your Lord. There is joy in heaven and joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Why is that? The angels rejoice because this is God’s delight. Micah prophesied, “He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot.” God’s anger is real and righteous but in Christ this anger is appeased by the one who is your substitute. Jesus is the one prophesied who would crush the head of the serpent and who will put all enemies under his feet forever. You see that God’s delight and joy is in saving people. His delight and joy are in saving you. And you know what? God is delighted and joyous today because you have been redeemed by Christ.

The compassion of God cannot be overstated. It really can’t. God’s compassion is toward sinners because he has redeemed them with the cost of his own blood. God’s mercy is only on account of Christ and his perfect life and atoning death otherwise God would not be just, and he would be a liar. For just as God’s compassion can’t be overstated, so too, our sin and what it brings about can’t be understated.

Now contrast all this with those at the beginning of the reading to see a warning and some instruction on what your heart and mind are to be toward your neighbor. If you don’t find joy when a sinner repents, you need to repent. Grumbling, holding a grudge, resentment, and anger toward your brother in Christ have absolutely no place in the Kingdom of God. This is not the Christian life it’s the life with resents God’s mercy and will ultimately find no real lasting joy in this life or the life to come.

You see the warning this today speaking to you as you look at yourself and examine it according to what God reveals to you. In the parable of the prodigal son, the other brother resents the fact that the father is happy and throws a celebration when his brother returned. To grumble against God showing mercy to your neighbor is sinful. To resent the fact there is joy over someone else repents is evil. Be warned and do not despise God or his grace for this is deadly. Instead, God calls you to “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.”

The instruction you have, however, is to see your Lord’s heart just as it has been shown to you and you are to show to your neighbor. Delight in your Lord Jesus and his salvation for you and delight when this is shown toward others. When your neighbor repents, rejoice. When he is refusing to repent, pray that he would and

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mourn that he is not. When your neighbor sins against you, forgive him and rejoice together and call your friends together to rejoice that reconciliation has occurred. Likewise, don't hold someone's sin against him when you have forgiven him. Don't grumble and complain but rejoice in that sinner who has been forgiven. When what has been lost has been found, sound the trumpets from the hilltops and proclaim that the Lord is good, and his mercy endures forever.

This, you see dear people of God in all this today. Joy is found and known in God's grace toward you in Christ. Fix your eyes on Jesus and see his compassion and mercy toward you as he is the righteous one in whom there is no deceit. By his life and crucifixion unto death for you he has accomplished your salvation. You like sheep have gone astray and he has found you. He came down from heaven and found you who are more precious than a lost coin. He didn't waste away his inheritance but laid it aside so that you would be redeemed and have a place at the feast thrown for you in your honor by the Father. That's what you have in Christ as your sin is forgiven and you have eternal life. There's great joy in heaven over you who have been called by the Gospel and given faith in Christ.

Your baptism day was a party in heaven and there is still rejoicing as your Lord continues to forgive you and guard and keep you in his care. There is great joy in heaven this day as your sin is forgiven and you have new life in Christ. The day is coming as well when you will see that joy and experience it fully and with all the company of God's saints and all the angels. On that day the joy will not end as you are raised from your grave and take your place with your brothers and sisters in Christ sitting at the feast prepared for you. Rejoice, even now, in what you have in Christ and what awaits you forever because God has had mercy and compassion upon you. He has sought you, found you, brought you near to himself and keeps you now and forever.

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