

When Does This Shepherd Smile?

17th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST [c], Proper 19

September 11, 2016

LUKE 15:1-10

⁵ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." ³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "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? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ 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.' ⁷ 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. ⁸ "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? ⁹ 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.' ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

It was an awkward conversation when Jesus was in the Pharisee's home. He was invited for a nice dinner, and as he was eating with the Pharisees and teachers of the law, they were watching his every move—he was among those who wanted to keep the religion pure, to make sure everyone was following the rules, and to exclude those who weren't.

This Pharisee would've had a nice home—the best appointments, strong, stone walls, and the food and wine were the best in town. They had Jesus on their own ground, where they felt safe, and they could listen to this Jesus, this rabbi with a different doctrine, and determine whether he was with them or against them, and whether or not they could put him in a position to be useful for their purposes of putting people under the Law.

To them, Jesus told a parable, and the parable led up to the big hit, which was Jesus saying to them,

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

[Luke 14:11]

Now *that* dinner is over, Jesus has left the table with the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, and he's gone to the other side of the tracks. The houses are rougher; the clothes aren't brand-name; the food is plain; the wine, bottom shelf. He's now with the tax-collectors and sinners, says Luke.

The tax-collectors were those who had joined in league with the occupying Romans in order to be their agents to collect taxes from their own neighbors—taxes which would then be sent back to Rome to pay for the troops occupying their own land. And the tax-collectors would keep a percentage of what they collected. So the more taxes these tax-collectors collected from their own neighbors, the more they could pocket. They were the low-lives nobody wanted around, and you would never invite them to your feast. And if you're a tax-collector, you know this, you walk around with this shame. But you can't just stop, you need to eat, and if you were to stop, it wouldn't matter anyway—once you're known as a tax-collector, you can't just wash the shame away, the name sticks to you.

If you are a Pharisee or teacher of the Law, the question you have before God is, How can I justify myself? What do I need to do to keep myself clean?

That's not the question the tax-collectors and sinners have. That train left the station a long time ago for them. They don't pretend to think they can clean themselves up. Their question is not about themselves, but about God. Can God save a sinner such as me? Would he even care to? Does he have any room for me, any use for me, or is he as ready to discard me and be done with me as are the Pharisees and teachers of the Law? Luke 15:1:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

If in the account just before this Jesus had spoken a harsh word to the Pharisees, telling them to repent, for whoever exalts themselves will be humbled, to these tax-collectors and sinners, Jesus speaks a consoling word, a word to gather them into his flock:

⁴ "What man of you,"

[said Jesus,]

"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? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ 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.' ⁷ 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.

If the Pharisees and teachers of the Law were showing how the kingdom of God could not include sinners, Jesus shows how the kingdom God includes *only* sinners. If the Pharisees and teachers of the Law were teaching that entrance to the kingdom comes through obedience, Jesus teaches how entrance into the kingdom comes through the gift of repentance and faith. And Jesus does this in giving us the imagery of a flock of sheep. You can't be a sheep on your own. It's a

flock. And in the flock, the sheep are bound to each other because they are bound to the Shepherd. He knows their names, they know his voice.

When we find ourselves to be like the Pharisees, finding ourselves trying to self-justify, trying to look down on others, trying to keep everyone clean by obedience, we hear Jesus say, ***I did not come to call the righteous, but the unrighteous***, and there we hear him tell us that we, in our self-justification are unrighteousness, and our shepherd brings us to his gift of repentance.

When we find ourselves the lost sheep, having wandered from his gifts, having tried to live apart from the congregation he gathers to his Name, finding ourselves isolated in our sin and weakness, we hear Jesus say, ***I did not come to call the righteous, but the unrighteous***, and we know that our Shepherd is again gathering us into his flock.

Because, what Jesus wants for his sheep is not a perfectly lived life under the Law's obedience. For that, Jesus could've left us in the hands of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. (And we can't live that life of obedience, anyway, unless we can somehow claim that we don't live in sinful flesh.) What Jesus, the Good Shepherd wants for his sheep is repentance. That's what brings a smile to the Shepherd's face. Luke 15:7:

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.

And repentance is not just contrition over sin. A teacher of the Law can accomplish that; a Pharisee can make the adulterous woman feel shame for her sin. But repentance is contrition over sin *and* faith in Jesus to forgive sin. It is hearing not only God's Word of Law, but finally his Word of Gospel. Repentance is confessing not only that I am a sinner, but also that Jesus is my Savior, who, by his Body and Blood, brings the forgiveness of the cross to me.

And repentance is confessing not only that Jesus is my Savior, is the Shepherd who gathers me into his flock, but confessing also that he has a flock. I am not a sheep in isolation, but I am his sheep bound in oneness with all his other sheep—for if he has his sheep floating around isolated and independent, without gathering them back into the flock, then he is no shepherd, but only a hireling.

So repentance is confessing that my Lord has me in oneness with all his other sheep, in such a way that I can look at them as my brothers and sisters, and I can go about my life in the sheepfold not counting their sins against them—for the Shepherd surely does not—but rejoicing that they, too, have been gathered into the flock by the Shepherd, they are cleansed by his Word, fed by his Sacrament, and the Good Shepherd has promised to never let them go.

For if there is one thing that brings a smile to the face of this Shepherd, and brings joy in Heaven and rejoicing in the Church, it is a repentant sinner gathered into his flock to hear his word of forgiveness and be joined to his sheep.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.