

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

We had a pretty violent thunderstorm Wednesday night, lot of rain, thunder and of course lightning. I actually woke up during part of the storm thinking it was time to get up for the day. Then I realized I had another six hours or so to sleep and I recall thinking I was glad I hadn't been out in when it broke, and equally glad I didn't have to go out in it. In our gospel this morning there are rumblings even more ominous than thunder over the north woods of Minnesota. When he told these parables, Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, where the storm would break on him in a vain attempt to eliminate the threat he posed to the ruling elite.

Jesus' audience is comprised of Pharisees and scribes, that is, the "righteous" of the community. They were complaining that "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So not only do we have the righteous religious folks, but we have sinners, the irreligious, as well. In addition of course, we have Jesus.

Tax collectors during Jesus' time were thought of as sinners, in part because they bought the right from the Romans to collect taxes which they could set as they wanted and since the Romans were paid the winning bid up front, for the tax collectors it wasn't so much what the market would bear as the sky is the limit. Tax collectors were also thought of as collaborators with the Roman occupiers, so they were despised on that count too.

We heard Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them, it's actually even more than that, he not only welcomed them, but he welcomed them into fellowship and in the Middle East then as now, that signifies acceptance on a very deep level. They are grumbling, murmuring, about Jesus, the same word used to describe the Jews in the wilderness as they grumbled or murmured about Moses and Aaron.

So Jesus tells them, the scribes and Pharisees, a parable. Now note he's not talking to everyone at this point but to those who are upset because he welcomes outcasts into fellowship with himself.

He refers to them as shepherds, people of the land, unclean by Jewish religious standards. Now a hundred sheep represents considerable wealth, and in this first parable it may be that the hundred sheep with owned by one person or collectively by a clan or village. Either way one sheep out of one hundred is a significant loss. Now the way this is actually written in Greek it's "If he has lost one of them." This is important because in the this area, then as now, the speaker never blames himself. But Jesus broke the common speech patterns by putting responsibility on the shepherd, in other words saying to the Pharisees and scribes "you lost your sheep, I went after it and brought it home, now you have the gall to complain! Don't you realize I'm making up for your mistake?"

And here's what those listening to Jesus would have understood, you don't sacrifice even one sheep (person) for the larger good of the group. To do so leaves everyone

other member insecure knowing he or she is of little value. To leave ninety-nine to find one sheep, potentially paying a high price to find the one, the shepherd offers the profoundest sense of security to the many.

The shepherd places his heavy burden on his shoulders when he has found his lost sheep, and he rejoices, and when he gets home he calls his friends and neighbors to celebrate. Friends and neighbors probably represent an entire family or clan, an entire street of a village or even a small village.

The Pharisees as religious leaders are the shepherds of Israel who had failed in their trust, the sheep are those lost from the community, i.e., sinners and tax collectors. Notice how the good shepherd who is Jesus in Jesus' parable searches without counting the cost, how he rejoices in the burden of restoration, and how he rejoices with the community at the success of restoration. Now we see an example of Jesus' subtle humor, the righteous i.e. the Pharisees, who need no repentance do not exist so heaven's joy in them will be non-existent. The lost sheep of course is the repentant sinner. But how can this sheep represent repentance?

Jesus defines repentance as the acceptance of being found.

Now Jesus tells a story about a lost coin. As important as the lost sheep was, a lost coin, one out of ten, back then was even more so. The woman searches diligently, find the coin she lost, and notice how she takes responsibility for having lost it. The finding of a lost coin, a sinner of the house of Israel, was part of the wealth of the nation. And again, how can a coin represent repentance? Because Jesus defines repentance as the acceptance of being found.

You and I are also found, we have received faith through the grace of God, we have eaten at the Lord's Table, partaking of the Lord's Supper, accepted into fellowship with our Lord who eats with sinners. Putting it simply, we accept being found, we are saved by grace through faith. Not by our actions, not by our intended actions. By grace through faith. And now we act accordingly.

AMEN