

“Joy in Heaven”

*“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?” (Luke 15:7).*

This is a big weekend in the life of our congregation. Every year at Emmanuel, the weekend after Labor Day means the launch of our Christian education season. This means that our Sunday school program starts back up, a new Bible study schedule kicks off, we launch a new Lutheran Christianity class, Family Confirmation begins and, during our 10:30 service, in very a public and formal fashion, we dedicate and pray for all of the people who serve to further this ministry. From the staff of our school and preschool, to the men and women who teach Sunday school or lead Bible studies, dozens of people serve as leaders in our ministry of Christian education. And, at Emmanuel, this is a big deal. In fact, outside of worship, this is the most important thing we do, and today, I want you all to clearly understand the reason this is true.

You see, the goal of Christian education and, in fact, the very purpose of the Church, is to announce to repentant sinners that, in Christ, they have been forgiven and accepted by God, and that, because of this fact, there is joy in heaven over them. *And this message is different from any other message they will hear in this world!* It’s important that you understand what I’m saying here because this message speaks to a need we all have. You see the heart of every single person who walks through the doors of our church or school or preschool is a heart tainted by sin; that is a non-negotiable fact of human existence.

And sometimes, the people who walk through the doors of our church or school are dealing with the brokenness that sin has brought to their lives, and they stand before the Lord desperately starving for mercy they know they don’t deserve. But the truth is, not everyone who walks through the doors of our church or school knows this, and not every sinner has a repentant heart. And frankly, this is true of us today. In fact, we are often quite comfortable in our sin and completely blind to the ways we have personally rejected God’s Word. And so, the ministry to which God has called us is always being rendered to both repentant and unrepentant sinners, and with every Bible class we teach and in every Sunday school lesson we lead we come face to face with both groups...and this is exactly what we see in today’s Gospel reading.

In the opening verses of today’s text, Luke tells us that there were two distinct groups of the people listening to Jesus. One of the groups was made up of tax collectors and sinners. These were people who had clearly violated God’s Law and they knew it. In fact, tax collectors were some of the most despised people in Jewish society. They had partnered with Rome and used the power that came with this alliance to extort money from their own people. They were sellouts, they were traitors, and they were hated for it. The other people Luke mentions in verse one, were “sinners.” Now, based on what I said a few minutes ago, you might look at that word and think, “What’s the big deal? We’re all sinners.” And that’s certainly true, but here this word means something more. Here, this word is used as a label meant to identify people who were “public” sinners and whose acts of rebellion had expelled them from the Jewish church. Tax collectors and sinners...both groups were despised, and both were seen as those who, by their own disobedience, had removed themselves from God’s people. And here in verse one, we are told that these religious outcasts were “all drawing near to hear” Jesus.

But they weren’t the only ones in the audience. Also present was a second group of people made up of the Pharisees and the scribes. These were the religious elites – men considered to be models of righteousness and, where Luke tells us that the first group was gathered to hear, this group of self-righteous religious leaders “grumbled.” It’s important to understand the meaning of this verb. The Pharisees and scribes weren’t simply whispering to each another with their hands over their mouths so no one could read the hate on their lips. No, this word meant that they were publicly protesting what they saw as an obvious violation of their social structure and religious rules. You see, in their minds, the Law clearly rejected this kind of open exchange with unclean people like the tax collectors and sinners. In fact, their rules were so rigid that they

were prohibited from dealing with people like this *even to teach them the Law*. Think about that! Their disregard for these people was so great that, in their eyes, they were worthless and lost and beyond saving. The Pharisees and scribes didn't approve of what Jesus was doing and they wanted everyone there to know it. So, in their indignation, and so that everyone could hear, they muttered and grumbled and sneered and said disdain: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

And in response to the obvious disgust of the religious leaders, Jesus tells one of the most beautiful and comforting parables in all of Scripture: "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" (Luke 15:4-5).

The language of sheep and shepherds would have been well-known to this audience. Throughout the Old Testament this imagery was used to describe God's love for His people and, as Jesus drew on these ideas for His parable, there's no doubt that His audience would have recalled Psalm 23 where David wrote, "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want..." or Isaiah 40 where the prophet said that God "tends his flock like a shepherd (and) gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart" (Isaiah 40:11). Even the words of today's first reading echo this theme as Ezekiel writes, "Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out" (Ezekiel 34:11). And as Jesus taught, the Pharisees and scribes certainly would have thought of themselves as the shepherds to whom He was referring; protecting the purity of the flock; guarding the helpless people against the unclean outsiders...that is, until Jesus concluded the parable. "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." In these words, Jesus turned the spotlight on the Pharisees and scribes, and these men, who considered themselves to be "righteous persons," would have been shocked to hear such a message.

Jesus spoke of God in ways that they had simply never considered. They could understand a God who would deal with someone who obediently came to Him...but this was a totally different teaching! Here Jesus was talking about a *seeking* God, a God who takes the initiative, a God who pursues the sinner and restores him back to the flock. This was the story of a shepherd who searches for and seeks out the lost... and there was no earthly framework for them to consider a God who goes after sinners. When the Pharisees and scribes had said, "This man receives sinners and eats with them" they had meant it as a rebuke, but in reality, their harsh words were the perfect description of the Shepherd who stood in their midst!

As we consider the words of this parable and what they mean for our lives today, we need to recognize ourselves in the scribes and Pharisees. And we need to honestly and humbly confront the sin in our own lives, because we are just as guilty of the pride and self-promotion that we see in this reading. And we are just as guilty of judging and controlling the behavior of others, all the while ignoring our own damning sins. We have all taken part in creating the kind of division we see in Luke 15 and today, we need to be honest about that! We need to take responsibility for who we are and for what we've done and we need to repent, because, dear brothers and sisters, when we repent...when we allow the Word of God to afflict and break our hearts and see how truly lost we are; *when we repent*...Jesus tells us that there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God!

The words of this parable are words of joy. They are the words of a Shepherd who searches out the lost; they are the words of a Savior who seeks sinners; they are the words of a God who wants nothing more than to bring His people home and who died to do it. *And this is why the ministry of Christian education is so important*. In our church and school and preschool; through our Sunday school classes and in our Confirmation program and in every Bible study we teach, the Shepherd is seeking the lost and the word of Christ is calling us to repent and believe. Today, this is our message and today, in your hearing, there is joy in heaven over you. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. Amen.

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