

In the name of Jesus; Amen.

Where do you expect or think God should be found? Surely as God, many would conceive of Him as being in heaven, in might, power, and glory, unattainable and untouchable for humankind. That is why many religions saw God or the divine as being the planets or the heavens or the stars. Others thought of the divine as basically super humans that had control of the powerful things on earth. They could make mistakes, but they were in control of sea, sky, lightning, war, fertility and more powerful than mankind. More and more today, it seems as if people think god or the divine is a creation of our own. It might be that humans see themselves as god-like when they have break-through inventions, make new scientific discoveries, or have political or financial power and influence. I have heard people say that god is good human interaction and communication, or god is seen in good weather, or god is in our minds only. What all these things have in common is that whatever anyone thinks of God, it is good, it is superior. Never is God to be found in dirt and filth, in conflict, among criminals and addicts and people down on life. Or so many think.

Just like the Pharisees thought. They thought they knew where God was to be found; or, rather, not found: with tax collectors and sinners. Specifically, Jesus, in the Gospel today, is eating with and preaching to tax collectors and sinners. These are the outcasts. The tax collectors had a tendency to overcharge for personal profit and they represented the same Roman government that conquered the Jewish land. Of course the Pharisees and scribes do not like them. Tax collectors hurt the Jewish people. And the sinners, well, that was simply a polite way of identifying the prostitutes. These groups are not liked, and their behavior is rightly looked down on. But that should not, and is not, a reason that the Gospel should be withheld from them. In fact, it is all the more reason for them to hear it, for they are repentant sinners in need of forgiveness.

The Pharisees and scribes grumble and complain, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” That is, Jesus does not simply eat one meal with some sinners and never speak to them again. Neither is it the case that He occasionally eats meals. It is Jesus’ habit, His practice, His custom to receive sinners and eat with them. Not only does Jesus interact with the outcasts, but He eats with them!

To eat with someone, especially in Jesus' day, was a big deal. There weren't ovens and microwaves that could quickly heat up food or freezers and refrigerators that could keep meat and cheese cold. There wasn't running water or 24/7 Wal-marts. You had to get wood for a fire, use salt to preserve the meat you had butchered, fetch water in buckets and plan how to pickle and preserve the food you had. To share hard-earned food from a personal food supply was an incredibly meaningful act. When Jesus, the great prophet, the Son of God, ate with the sinners and tax collectors, it showed them that they were valued. A meal is a great way to get to know others, to enjoy food together. Jesus wanted to have fellowship with them. But not just some superficial friendship where He knew them and they greeted Him. Not for the occasional healing of a relative. These outcasts, these sinners came for one reason only: to *hear* Him, to listen to the Word of life, of forgiveness, or reconciliation with God. They came to hear that they are so loved and valued that Jesus would die for their sins on the cross, repair their relationship to God, and fling open the gates of eternal life. And the sinners were not the only ones seeking this fellowship: Jesus Himself sought it out and came to eat with them, describing Himself as a sheep-seeking shepherd and a coin-searching woman.

So where is God to be found? It is as the Pharisees say, even as they condemn Jesus: among sinners. And Jesus will speak two parables that clearly show this. His place is with sinners. Jesus doesn't condone the activity of sinners. In fact, the word in Greek that he uses for "lost" in describing the sheep and the coin has strong connections with the concept of one who will perish, be destroyed, be lost unless they repent. Jesus fully understands that sinners, that you and I, break the Commandments, do bad things and suffer many bad things in this broken world. But He is preaching a new reality to sinners, to us. A new way to live: as those He has searched for and cared about and found and brings home.

With a brilliant use of irony, Jesus confronts the Pharisees. He says that there will be more joy in heaven over 1 repentant sinner, than 99 righteous persons who need no repentance. Jesus calls out the Pharisees and scribes. Heaven does not rejoice over people who are too prideful, too haughty to think that they have nothing they ought to repent of. Heaven does not rejoice over people who think that they don't really need God's gifts of Word and Sacrament here in church. Heaven does not rejoice when the Pharisees and scribes think they are not in the same category as the tax collectors and sinners. In effect, He says to the Pharisees, "If you think you do not need to repent, if you think that you are not a sinner, if you think you are right with

God apart from Me, then there is no joy in heaven for you, and the threat of eternal death in hell looms large for you.” Take this to heart dear Christians. The Pharisees and scribes were the religious leaders of their day. None of us ought to be so foolish and hard-hearted to think there is nothing we need to repent of. We are often much like the Pharisees who would prefer to question why Jesus gives second chances or why we should as well. We are like the scribes who would rather grumble against God and each other, instead of speak face to face what is on our minds.

You see, Jesus’ message is for sinners, and for people who know they are sinners. The meaning of the parables is summed up in this: the lost are found. But what does it mean to be lost? The same thing it means to be a sinner. You are broken, you are crushed, you do not love God as He created you to do. Mankind lost their perfect and good relationship with God. That is something you are guilty of. God would have you live a good life and follow His commandments, but you break them if not in action, in your heart. And lost people try to find themselves or find meaning in other things, whether money or power or sex or addictions, or friends and family, or this life, but it comes up empty. Just ask the tax collectors and sinners. They know that beneath all the distractions and worries of this life, all people are empty and lost. They are guilt-ridden, think poorly of themselves, are in despair and know they do not stand right with God. We need Someone more powerful, more perfect, and more loving than we could ever be to heal our souls and find us.

That Someone sits among sinners. He is with you in the wilderness of this life, even as you suffer and He goes after you and finds you. Or He gets on His hands and knees and searches for the outcast and lowly, in the dirt and filth of this sinful world, where your sin has laid you low, and He finds you. And see what the shepherd and the woman do when they find the sheep and the coin. They call together their friends and neighbors. They rejoice. This kind of celebration was always done in the context of a meal. They feast and celebrate together that the lost are found, even as all of heaven does.

We often think of God as having all emotions under control, as stoic and collected, as being exalted and almighty. But in the Gospel readings for today, we see a God enwrapped in our misery and sin. He is a concerned shepherd, searching every pasture, valley, rock, and plain, calling out until His voice is hoarse until He finds that lost sheep. He may search and call through the night and during the day. The funny thing about lost sheep is that once they are separated from the flock and wander for a bit, they lay down and stay put. They can’t move.

Neither can we. We may wander and flit through the vistas and hills and valleys of life, thinking we are finding the path to meaning, but being lost the whole while. But in the end, we are the sheep who can't move, who can't approach God, who can't find peace until our Good Shepherd's voice calls out to us and He lifts us upon His shoulders. He then carries you to His house and celebrates with a holy meal with His friends and neighbors. God is like the frantic woman scrabbling in the dust and dirt to find a single little coin. Like most houses of Jesus' time, there were no windows and it was pitch black inside. But she lights a lamp and strategically looks all over, not accepting defeat as an option, and knowing that this little insignificant coin is of so much value to her. Is that not you? A sinner, otherwise insignificant to the world, lost in the dust and dirt of sin, sitting in darkness until the light of Christ's Word finds you and Jesus Christ assures you that His efforts are because you matter to Him.

That is what Jesus is all about. True God comes as true man to the earth, is born into your condition of sin and despair, pain and being lost, and seeks you. The tax collectors and sinners, you and I, draw near to Jesus in order to hear Him, to hear the message that He died for all the pain and sin and misery in this world so that He might open heaven for you and bring you there. Upon those same shoulders that bore the sheep home, He bore the cross and died the death that you deserved to give you eternal life, to find you, to bring you home.

And God is exactly where you should expect Him, just as He was 2000 years ago: in the midst of sinners. He is here at church, in fellowship with you, giving you His Word that you draw near to hear. The celebration that you were once lost but are now found occurs around a meal, a feast, at this altar as you receive the very thing that makes you right with God: Jesus' flesh and blood for the forgiveness of your sins.

Jesus is right where He needs to be today and always. He is with repentant sinners. He is with you and I who were once outcasts, once lost, but are now found. Jesus offers to you a free and full message of hope, peace, and forgiveness. You are right with God and dearly loved by him, so loved that He sent Jesus to destroy your sins on the cross and rise to offer you a new life. That is something that should and does make you rejoice. Because heaven, because the angels, because God is rejoicing over you right now.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; Amen.