SERMON

Third Sunday after Trinity: 1 Timothy 1:12–17

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11 September 2016 · Sermon 2 of 2

"The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."

When it comes to the lost, the Lord never gives up. The lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, you, lost in Sin and Death. He never gives up. He came to seek and to save the lost. He came into the world to save sinners. Not His friends but His enemies. Not saints but sinners. It's called "grace," kindness undeserved and unmerited. "Love to the loveless shown."

The apostle Paul was an example. He was, by his own admission, a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent opponent of Christ and the Gospel. He was feared by the first believers. They knew who Paul was and what he was about as he went from synagogue to synagogue rounding up the Christians for trial. He was dead set on silencing the Gospel, so that the name of Jesus would be forgotten and never again mentioned in the synagogue or on the street corner. And he thought he was doing the will of God. He thought he was serving the cause of God. He thought he was being faithful. But he was wrong. The Lord could have given up on the Paul, let him go his own way, but He had other plans. The persecutor would become the disciple and apostle. The one who tried to silence the Gospel would bring the Gospel to the Roman world and turn it upside down. The Lord never gave up on Paul. He came to seek and to save the lost. The lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost Pharisee named Saul.

The religious were grumbling over Jesus' table companions. "This man receives sinners and He eats with them." How dare He! Didn't He know what sort of people these were, these tax agents and "sinners" of one sort or another? The Pharisees and the scribes kept their distance from these people, lest they be soiled by the company they kept. They were righteous and religious and they kept company with righteous and religious people. They thanked God daily they were not like those tax collectors. They looked down in judgment on those "sinners," whoever they were and whatever their sin might have been. They were better, closer to God, holier than the rest. And so they grumbled over Jesus, this upstart rabbi from the north who

had a penchant for eating with the wrong sorts of people. “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

They didn’t see themselves in the same boat. Jesus received them too, and He ate with them, but they didn’t connect the dots. They too were sinners, which is why Jesus ate with them. There isn’t a sinner around whom Jesus will not receive and welcome to His table. No sin too great for the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He stops at nothing, He gives everything. He does it all, for you and for the world. Every sinner atoned for by His death; every sin answered by His blood. Behold the Lamb. He doesn’t let sin get in the way; instead He forgives it. Pays for it. Wipes it out.

“Which of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine i the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?” Well, I’m a city boy and not a country boy, and I know little to nothing about shepherding and sheep, but I do know that common sense would answer Jesus’ question with “no one.” No one does that. No one leaves ninety-nine perfectly good sheep to fend for themselves in the wilderness while he goes off to find one dead asset. Why risk the flock for the sake of the runaway sheep? He’ll probably run off again anyway. Write it off, leave it to the wolves, cut your losses, and tend to the ninety-nine you have. That’s sensible. That’s how we do it. We cut our losses, conserve our assets.

Or what about that woman with the ten silver coins who loses one and spends the whole day sweeping the house and doesn’t rest until she finds it? Well, maybe. How long do you search until you write it off. Yeah, it’s ten percent, and a fair piece of change. You could buy a lamb with one of the coins. Four of them would get you a slave, so we’re not taking nickels and dimes here. But still, how long do you look, how much time and energy do you expend on something that is lost?

The Lord doesn’t give up. He never stops seeking and searching. He came to save sinners, and He aims to find every last one of them in His death.

There is rejoicing too, and a party. The lost sheep gets a free ride home on the shepherd’s shoulders and there’s a party in his honor, and presumably a lamb that’s slain for the feast, which somehow just adds to the outrage of it all. They wayward sheep is the cause for rejoicing. The lost coin is the cause for a party that’s going to cost a whole lot more than the value of that coin. And all of this is a warmup for the prodigal son who leaves home with his

father's inheritance, wastes it, and comes back smelling of pigs only to be welcomed with open arms by his father. And there is rejoicing, and a party, and a fatted calf for the BBQ, and an older brother out in the field who doesn't think this is so wonderful, and takes his stand with the religious and grumbles over his father's prodigal grace that welcomes back lost and stinking sons with open arms of forgiveness.

The apostle Paul was the lost sheep, the lost coin, that lost son. Lost in a world of religion and commandment and obligation and trying to please God. Lost in a world of judgment and fear and measuring and looking down on others. And the Lord, who came to seek and to save the lost, found Paul on the road to Damascus, struck him blind, had him led around by the hand for three days, pointed him to Ananias and a house on Straight St, and to Baptism. The lost was found and there was joy in heaven.

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Do we dare see ourselves in the same way? Do we dare not to? Who among us can say we are without sin? Who among us is able to cast the first stone at another? Oh, when we look at the outside of things, we might come to the conclusion that we're not doing so badly, that there are others who are far worse off than we are. But once we get a look at our spiritual MRI, the deep diagnosis of the Law revealing what's going on in that old heart of ours, things don't look quite so good. "Chief of sinners" is not an exageration after all. In fact, that's precisely how faith views our condition in Adam. Christ came to save sinners, and I'm the biggest sinner of all. "Chief of sinners, though I be, Jesus shed His blood for me." And the beauty of that "chief of sinners" place is that it can't get any lower. You have nowhere to go but up from there. It's being dead in order to be raised to life. It's having nothing to offer in order to receive.

We are that lost sheep, that lost coin, that lost son. We are Adam, each of us. We all take our place with Paul as chief among sinners. No matter how good we think we are. No matter how much good we think we've done. Before God, we must be chief of sinners. We need to own it, to stop denying it, to cease justifying ourselves by climing on the backs of our fellow sinners. We're in this mess together, and we're responsible for the mess. Paul could claim ignorance, but that wasn't an excuse. He was still a blasphemer, a persecutor, a willful and stubborn enemy of Christ, of the church, of the Gospel. But the Lord didn't give up on Him.

In fact, Paul says that he became an example of unmerited mercy and grace, a kind of object lesson of God's undeserved kindness to sinners. "But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost of sinners, Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life." Paul's life became an example of God's mercy and grace in Jesus. The Lord never gave up on Paul, but sought him and found him and used him in ways Paul could never have imagined. The persecutor of the church became its chief apostle. God is gracious and merciful and good as well as resourceful.

He doesn't cease to seek and to save. He never gives up. There is no sheep so lost, no coin so misplaced, no son or daughter so prodigal that He doesn't seek to embrace them. You may think you don't deserve a place at His table. The devil, the world, and your old Adam would try to convince you that you are too great a sinner for Jesus to welcome you. And you would be wrong. What the Pharisees and the religious said as criticism turns out to be the sweetest of good news: Jesus receives sinners and He eats with them. He died to save sinners, of whom each of us are chief and foremost in our own rebellious ways.

When we say that we are too sinful to be at Christ's table, to have a place in His kingdom, to be one of His disciples, that's not humility but pride. It's our old Adam taking pride in our sin. But where sin abounds, there grace, undeserved kindness much more abounds. And where sinners are gathered, there Jesus is. And when the lost are found, when the sheep is returned, the coin is found, the son is restored, when you and I and any lost child of Adam returns to his or her Father and is found in Christ, there is rejoicing among the angels, the archangels, and the whole company of heaven.

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In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "1 Timothy 1:12-17 / 11 September 2016", posted 2016-09-12 (https://htlcms.org/2016/09/1-timothy-112-17-11-september-2016/).