

Sermons at Christ Church

Building Relationships Through Love.

Pentecost 14

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“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” To many of Jesus’ accusers, one his main problems was his openness, the gift of opening the door wide enough for everyone-sinners and undesirables to walk in. They detested Jesus because Jesus didn’t look at people the same way that they did. If they put others down, Jesus lifted them up. If they cast people away, Jesus invited them in. If they were dismissive of others, Jesus embraced them. If they segregated themselves from sinners, Jesus eats with them.

Jesus’ appeal was not only about his message, but the fact that he didn’t discriminate against anyone-sinners and righteous alike were welcome, women and men were welcome, children and adults were welcome, thieves and lepers were welcome. But this radical welcome was so offensive to the Pharisees and Scribes because it diluted their message of inequality before God.

They had concluded that they did not have to fellowship with sinners, and sinners do not deserve fellowship with Jesus. If Jesus shared table with sinners, then he too, is a sinner because righteous people do not fellowship with sinners.

But Jesus rejects that narrative and tells a story to illustrate how special and important the sinner is to God. The sinner embodies the sympathies and mercies of God, and the sinner remind us that God doesn’t cast us away because of our sins. It is for this reason that the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep and searches for that one sheep. That is why the woman lit a lamp and searched for that one coin. The one sheep is equal in value as the ninety-nine, the lost coin is equal in value as the nine.

Jesus tells these stories to highlight the great length to which God goes to reconcile with the lost sinner. God leaves no stone unturned. God goes above and beyond. God even does the unthinkable-yes, offering His beloved son for the sake of lost sinner.

It is for this reason that Paul reminds us in his letter to Timothy “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners-of whom I am the foremost.” Even Paul embodies that same grace.

The good news is that the sinner isn’t cast away because of their sins, the sinner is worth looking for and being reconciled with God. The sinner is worth dying for. You cannot die for yourself, nor can you absorb any punishment. You are worth dying for. And so, the savior dies for you. Listen to this wonderful illustration of the good news of God.

Once upon a time in a far-off country, there was an ancient king who was known to be the most loving and just king who had ever existed. Eventually he discovered that somebody was stealing from the treasury. The king issued a decree-that a sentence of ten lashes in front of the entire kingdom would be visited on whoever is discovered to have been stealing from the treasury. The theft continued and he eventually issued a final decree; forty lashes would be visited upon the person who was caught stealing from the treasury. But the truth is that forty lashes was a death sentence. As weeks went by it was discovered that no other than the daughter of the king was the one who was stealing from the treasury.

When that news broke, a question began to ripple through the kingdom. How could the most loving king who’s ever existed kill his own daughter? Some people thought he would pardon her but then how would he be just? Some people thought he would punish her but then how would he be loving?

The king examined the case and said, the law is clear, crime has taken place, justice must fall, the sentence must be passed. The king’s own daughter was brought in front of the entire kingdom, and when she got to the front, she was laid over on an executioner’s table and tied to the table. The executioner ripped open the back of her shirt and stepped back.

But just as the executioner lifted his whip to issue the first lash, the king stood up from his throne and yelled stop. Everyone was in dismay. Silently, the king walked forward, bent over his daughter

wrapped his body around his daughter on the stump, ripped his shirt on his own back, looked at the executioner and said, 'Now hit her.'

The executioner objected, "I can't hit her without hitting you" 'Now hit her.' Said the king. 40 lashes fell upon the back of the king over the back of his daughter and the king died and the girl went free. That was done for you-the king died for you.

The daughter of the king deserved her punishment. You and I deserve our punishment. But that isn't what God desires-our sins are never enough. God, like the shepherd and the woman, takes the initiative to search for the lost sinner and be reconciled with that sinner. God takes our sins upon God's self and commits God's self to death even for the sake of the lost sinner.

If Jesus welcomes the sinner, it isn't because the sin doesn't matter, it is grace that matters. The sinner cannot restore the self unto God's good graces and fellowship, in fact the sinner might not even know he or she is lost, it is God who does the restoration, it is God who takes the initiative, it is God who goes out looking for the lost, it is God who knocks on the sinner's door, it is God, the prodigal father who runs to the lost sinner, clothes them with purple robe and rejoices with others because the lost one has been found.

I heard about this elderly pastor. He was closed to death and sent word to two of his members-an IRS agent and a lawyer to come to his house. Upon arrival, he motioned for them to sit on each side of the bed. The men were very moved that they could be with their minister in his final moment. One point the lawyer asked 'Sir, why did you choose both of us?' The minister mustered up some strength and said 'Jesus died between two sinners and that's the way I want to go.'

When I was in grade school and used to walk long distances to school, I remember seeing around town with this simple message "I've found it." I didn't know what they lost but they had found something. Our reality is that we often lose our way. But the joy of life isn't about being lost, it is about knowing that someone cares enough about you to look for you until they find you.

I am more than satisfied with the joy of knowing that you are precious enough to be sought after. That you are so, so precious in the sight of God that God deems you worthy of His best efforts. You are so valuable to God that God has never taken God's eyes off of you-remember the song,

His Eye is on the Sparrow. *“...When Jesus is my portion. When Jesus is my friend. I sing because I’m free. I sing because I am happy. His eye is on the Sparrow. And I know He watches me.”*

And God’s word assures me that I am of more value than the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. I know that I am worth more than any sparrow.

A few days ago, we all heard the horrific story of a political assassination. Charlie Kirk, a young man who was murdered by another young man-Tyler Robinson. We don’t know the motive of the assassin, but it doesn’t matter. What matters is that there’s cold blood running down the floor, and two lives have been destroyed. For what? I will write more about this on Thursday.

Up until the story broke, I didn’t know Charlie, nor had I ever heard about him or his rhetoric. But it saddens me that Tyler will find more than enough reason to assassinate Charlie. Was it because he thought that Charlie didn’t deserve to live or he thought that Charlie was so lost he couldn’t be redeemed? Did he think that violence was the best answer to his disagreements with Charlie? To what extent does hate drive us into committing heinous crimes? If we were to respond to such atrocities like the Pharisees, we will not in any way grant Tyler a modicum of respect or courtesy.

Like Tyler and everyone else we all seem lost. Our problem has always been about whether we can find enough value in another person to understand their worth, and then dare to look for them, dare to welcome them, dare to embrace them, dare to walk with them, dare to eat with them and dare to rejoice with them.

The point must be made that we are called to welcome and rejoice with others-especially those with whom we disagree and believe to be lost, not because our disagreements don’t matter but because our disagreements, like our sins, are not enough and shouldn’t be enough for us to overcome. Life is of more value than arguments and violence doesn’t solve those arguments.

Jesus identified with sinners and ate with them because he understood what it meant to be human. You and I, like the Pharisees, don’t understand what it means to be human that is why we always worry ourselves with segregation and violence.

Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them because he saw in them the true value of every human being. Yes, there's greater joy in heaven over a repentant sinner because to turn one's life around is a miracle we should always yearn for.

Henri Nouwen writes "How am I to let myself be loved by God? God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me and longing to bring me home." Home is where you belong, that's where the rest of the fold is, and God's free gift of mercy and love welcomes you and welcomes every lost sinner home with rejoicing.

Amen.