

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Jesus' renown was growing. He invited everyone "*who has ears to hear, let him hear*" (Luke 14:35), and "*tax collectors and sinners*" responded to the invitation. Our Gospel has them "*drawing near [to Jesus] to hear him.*"

"*Pharisees and ... scribes*" also came to see Jesus, but they weren't there to seek His help or comfort. They were observing Him, grumbling among themselves, hoping perhaps to catch the ever more popular Jesus in something that could cause His downfall.

They had tried before, thinking that accusations of breaking the Sabbath, might turn people away. Jesus then parried their strike and put them to shame: "*You hypocrites!*" He said. "*Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it?*" (Luke 13:15) Again, "*Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?*" ... "*Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?*" (Luke 14:3, 5) The Pharisees and lawyers didn't reply, but the questions themselves supplied the expected answer: "Of course, we would!"

On this day, the Pharisees and scribes grumbled because Jesus was RECEIVING tax collectors and sinners, welcoming them to His table, and eating with them. How inappropriate, those Pharisees thought and grumbled as they looked on, challenging Jesus again and the very reason that He left His Father's side to dwell with us!

In fact, table fellowship was a big deal to the Jews. Sitting down and eating with someone showed a "special sign of acceptance." "[I]t is little wonder that Jesus' table fellowship with sinners offended the cultural and theological sensitivities of the Pharisees," writes Kenneth Bailey. (Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke (Combined edition)*, Chapter 7).

But the Pharisees misunderstood. Jesus' receiving of sinners at His table should not be seen as accepting or approving of their sin. Rather, Jesus invited sinners to come to Him as the sick are encouraged to go to a physician, and Jesus says to the sin sick: "*I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance*" (Luke 5:31-32).

Thus, was it inappropriate for Jesus to act in this way? No! It was the Father's purpose in sending Christ Jesus. Jesus would later proclaim: "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost*" (Luke 19:10). And in Matthew's telling of this parable, though not every manuscript has it, Jesus says, "*For the Son of Man came to save the lost*" (Matt. 18:11). Moreover, in our Epistle, St. Paul wrote to

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Timothy: *“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners....”*

Now this time the Pharisees’ grumbling was not an open assault against Jesus. They complained among themselves: *“This man receives sinners and eats with them.”* No matter. Jesus knew what they were saying, and so He confronted the self-righteous Pharisees and comforted the manifest sinners by telling two parables with similar meaning. Yes, Jesus’ parables were meant for both sets of ears.

Jesus invited the hearers, both the “righteous” Pharisees and the manifest sinners, to place themselves in the parables asking, *“What man of you ...”* or *“What woman”* Here again, the question supplies the answer. Which of you, if you had lost a sheep, would leave the others and go in search of the one? Which of you, if you had lost a coin, would not scour the house in search of it. “Of course, you would.”

And that’s who we are ... sheep that love to wander, as the great Lenten hymn puts it. For we are all ..., those who imagine themselves righteous and those who acknowledge their sin, we are all the one! Isaiah says it this way: *“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way”* (Isa. 53:6). David mournfully intones: *“They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one”* (Psalm 14:3). And Paul writes: *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Rom. 3:23).

Which means, of course, that when the shepherd goes out in search of the one lost sheep, he goes out in search of us all. The Good Shepherd, God’s own Son, came down from the Father’s side not just to atone for the sins of one, or of a few, but for the sins of all. There may be those who think themselves righteous, but they delude themselves. Nevertheless, Jesus came for them, too, and died for them, too.

Which is the Good Shepherd’s way of seeking and saving ... He dies. Bearing *“the iniquity of us all”* (Isa. 53:6), the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:15). Johann Heermann, the great Lutheran hymn writer, said it this way — you know the tune: *“What punishment so strange is suffered yonder! The Shepherd dies for sheep that loved to wander; The Master pays the debt His servants owe Him, Who would not know Him”* (LSB439:4).

It is strange, and sounds so foolish ... utter folly: Christ crucified; and yet, by this act and by this preaching God is seeking and saving those who are perishing, lost in the wilderness. Kenneth Bailey, whom I mentioned earlier, talks about the cultural context for Jesus’ parable, telling us that there were often two or three shepherds keeping watch over a flock that size. Thus, Bailey suggests, it wasn’t foolish at all to leave the ninety-nine with the other shepherds while one shepherd would go off in search of the lost sheep.

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I don't doubt Bailey's scholarship, but it seems to me that he seeks to make reasonable the folly of the cross. "Of course, the one shepherd did this; it's to be expected." But Jesus' sacrifice was not expected — He told His disciples and they resisted: "*Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you*" (Matt. 16:22). Jesus' cross remains folly — God's ways are still not our ways — His cross is heroic, the greatest single event in history, God's own atonement for the sins of the world.

Back to the parable: the shepherd finds the lost sheep and brings it back rejoicing. The one sheep has been restored to the flock — for us, Jesus says, this is a sinner who has repented. This remains true: although Jesus died for all, not all are saved. Why? Although He doesn't want any to perish, yet not all reach repentance (2 Pet. 3:9)! Not all believe. Thus Bailey is helpful here. Jesus says the shepherd searches for the lost sheep "*until he finds it,*" hopefully alive, but perhaps dead. Either way, he puts it on his shoulder and brings it home, rejoicing if alive, as proof of no foul play if dead. The sheep brought back alive is now restored to the flock with rejoicing. So it is with the sinner restored through repentance and forgiveness. There is rejoicing on earth and in heaven.

Finally, such rejoicing is a communal event. It is a time to gather together friends and neighbors to give thanks. Dear friends, this is what we do as we gather together here in worship, each one of us, wandering sheep restored unto God by repentance and faith. We celebrate at the great banquet board that our Lord sets for us. That body which our Shepherd sacrificed for us, that blood which Christ shed to propitiate our sins and redeem us, is offered here to repentant sinners for our forgiveness, but also in celebration with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

Yes! Here we join the angel's heavenly song. The lost have been found! Repenting and forgiven, we have been restored! Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.