

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

*“Rejoice with Jerusalem”* begins the Introit in the One-year series of readings. In that schema of readings, this Sunday is a brief respite in the midst of the penitent season of Lent, loosening our *“sackcloth,”* clothing us *“with gladness,”* and turning our *“mourning into dancing”* (Ps. 30:11). In that schema, this Sunday was called *Laetare*, and we would drape the altar in rose colored paraments, reflective of the change of mood.

But in the Three-year series of readings, the theme of rejoicing is absent from the Introit, and we must trod on to the cross without taking a break from the reality of our sins which weigh us down and seek to keep us in the muck. Out of the depths again today, we cried out, *“Have mercy on me, O God,” “for [we] know [our] transgressions, and [our] sin is ever before [us]. Against you, you only, have [we] sinned and done what is evil in your sight”* (Ps. 51:1, 3-4).

And yet, Isaiah begins to call us out of our despondency: *“Give thanks to the LORD, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples ... Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; ... Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”* And in the Gospel, we hear the sounds of celebration, music and dancing, for that which was lost has been found, that which was dead is alive.

As we move toward the yearly remembrance of that sacrifice that reconciled us to God, this Gospel text, this parable, is here to remind us of the motivation and end of that sacrifice. This parable makes us glad at our justification.

The motivation was the great love of the Father toward His children — all of His children, manifest sinners and the seemingly righteous. In the parable, this is seen in the father’s actions toward his sons. In the case of the younger son, while the son *“was still a long way off,”* the father ran out to greet him, embrace and kiss him, clothe him. In the case of the older son, this son was unwilling to enter the feast, yet the father was not deterred. Again, he came out to meet the son where he was and pleaded with him to come in to the feast.

This is God’s way. He doesn’t wait for us to make the first entreaty, but *“God shows his love for us ... while we were still sinners”* (Rom. 5:8), and He does it through Christ, by cross and death. Again, St. Paul says, *“in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ”* (Eph. 2:13). And the apostle John says it this way: *“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his*

*Son to be the propitiation for our sins*” (1 John 4:9-10), indeed, “*for the sins of the whole world*” (1 John 1:2).

And to what end? God sent forth His own sinless Son to be born under the law (Gal. 4:4) and “*made ... to be sin ... so that in him we might become the righteousness of God,*” so that He might not count our “*trespasses against*” us. You are reconciled and redeemed by God’s love in Christ; you are forgiven by being in Him—whether manifest sinner or seemingly righteous.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son that Jesus tells us today, we have both kinds: “*tax collectors and sinners*” and “*Pharisees and ... scribes.*” The former group was following after Jesus; the latter group was grumbling and complaining that Jesus “*receives sinners and eats with them.*”

It’s not too hard to see then in the parable that the first of the sons, the younger son, represents the manifest sinners. He disrespected his father by asking for his inheritance — tantamount to wishing his father were dead, and then went off to a far country and squandered his inheritance in prodigal living. Again, the figure of being “far off” and the depths of depravity that the younger son got himself into are meant to illustrate the kind of iniquitous men and women that were following Jesus.

And yet, as the parable also illustrates, these manifest sinners were not reveling in their sins. Jesus is saying that, like the younger son who had come to his senses, admitting, “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants,*” so these notorious sinners were trying to change their ways. They were repenting of their sins, and Jesus was there to forgive them with His manifold grace and to welcome them back into the household of God as children of the heavenly Father, even as the father in the parable bestowed his grace upon the younger son, clothing him with a clean robe, putting a ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet.

And, through this father in the parable who has the fattened calf prepared and calls for a celebration, Jesus is telling the grumblers that He will continue to make merry and eat with even great sinners who repent of their sins and seek forgiveness from Christ. As Jesus concludes the parables that immediately precede this one: “*there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents*” (Luke 15:10).

Jesus is telling you the same thing today. There is no sin that has not been atoned for; there is no sin so egregious that it cannot be forgiven. Come to your senses; repent; hear Christ’s absolution: “*My blood covers over all your sins.*” You are forgiven for the sake of Jesus. You are restored. “*See what kind of love the*

*Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God*” (1 John 3:1); and so you are in Christ!

But there is another son in this parable, the older son, and it’s also not too difficult to see that this son represents the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling. The older son arrogantly said, *“I never disobeyed your command,”* in perhaps willful blindness to the disrespect he also showed to his father as he accepted his inheritance before its time—indeed, the disrespect he was showing to his father right then with his grumbling.

This son is never brought to his senses; he never shows remorse or exhibits repentance; and never is it said about him as was said of the younger son, *“This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.”*

Dear friends in Christ, all of our sins are trespasses against the commands of our Father in heaven, and every one of them is worthy of condemnation. But God the Father doesn’t condemn us for them because of Jesus and the love He expressed toward us in His cross and death. Your sins will not condemn you — but your arrogant self-righteousness will; your impenitence will; your faithlessness will.

Who are you? Are you the Pharisee bragging that you are *“not like other men”* (Luke 18:11), confident in your sinlessness, boasting in all your good deeds, and grumbling that Jesus welcomes tax collectors and sinners? Or are you the tax collector, *“standing far off,”* too ashamed of your sins even to *“lift up your eyes to heaven,”* but beating your breast, saying, *“God, be merciful to me, a sinner”* (Luke 18:13)? One is justified; the other is not. One is invited to eat and drink at a foretaste here at this altar today; the other is not. One will be exalted; the other will not. One will make merry with singing and dancing and eating at the eternal, heavenly feast; the other will not.

Who are you? I’m not inviting manifest sin by the question. I’m not promoting the so-called “cheap grace.” I’m inviting deep reflection on your condition. I’m inviting you to live in repentance, in the forgiveness of sins, in the joy of life everlasting with songs of joy, with shouts of praise, and with thanks to the Lord, for He is good and His steadfast love endures forever.

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