

In the ✠ name of Jesus. Amen.

Some time back, I received a poem from my mother via email. Now, I love my mother, but not everything she shares with me is worthy to be shared. She often forgets to check the veracity of the emails she forwards on from other well-meaning but misinformed friends and relatives. The good news is that she has stopped sending those emails that try to shame you into sending them on—I'll bet you know what I'm taking about: "Unless you send this on to everyone in your contacts list, you're no real Christian." And since no one wants to be considered a "Christian in name only," you send it on to everyone in your contacts list, and the Internet traffic increases exponentially. Well, I'm not so easily shamed, and I say to you: "Don't fall for it." Most of it is not worth the time it takes to read it—though I do read it if it's from my mother—and it's not worth sending it on.

But this sermon is not about Internet spam. As I said, I received this poem from my mother—the author is unknown—and I thought it was good enough to keep and even use...as far as it goes. Indeed, I already did use it in a letter conversation with a former Zion student who, sadly, finds himself in prison. Today I want to use it with you and make connections with our texts.

I was shocked, confused, bewildered
As I entered Heaven's door, ...
Not by the beauty of it all, Nor the lights or its décor.
But it was the folks in Heaven Who made me sputter and gasp --
The thieves, the liars, the sinners, The alcoholics and the trash.
There stood the kid from seventh grade Who swiped my lunch money twice.
Next to him was my old neighbor Who never said anything nice.
Bob, who I always thought Was rotting away in hell,
Was sitting pretty on cloud nine, Looking incredibly well.
I nudged Jesus, 'What's the deal? I would love to hear Your take.
'How'd all these sinners get up here? God must've made a mistake.'

Let me stop there for a moment. This fellow's attitude (in the poem) is prevalent, isn't it? It's the Pharisees' and scribes' attitude in our Gospel lesson today. How scandalous! This man, Jesus, receives sinners and eats with them. If Jesus had been acting as some generous nobleman having pity on these lower class persons in need, helping and feeding them, that would have been different. But He was receiving them, as guests, as people worthy to sit at His table, worthy for Him to come and sit down with them.

He was receiving them as if they were one with Him and He with them. And that's right for that's what the incarnation is all about. That's why Jesus came down from the Father's side: to take on our common flesh, that by shedding our common blood, He might redeem sinners: *"the lawless and disobedient, ... the*

ungodly and sinners, ... the unholy and profane, ... those who strike their fathers and mothers, ... murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers ...” (1 Tim. 1:9-10). He came in our flesh, suffering the shame of the cross, to redeem “*blasphemer[s], persecutor[s], and insolent opponent[s]*” (1 Tim. 1:13) like St. Paul. He came in the poverty of our flesh, becoming sin who knew no sin, to redeem our sinful flesh: “The thieves, the liars, the sinners, The alcoholics and the trash. ... the kid ... Who swiped [the] lunch money ... [the] neighbor Who never said anything nice.” Thus, St. Paul said, “*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners....*”

And we think that sounds pretty nice, but so what? What does that have to do with me? And that’s where that poem continues. Now remember, our fellow was in heaven walking around with Jesus, and he saw all these sinners there, and he asked,

‘What’s the deal? I would love to hear Your take.

‘How’d all these sinners get up here? God must’ve made a mistake.’

And he goes on,

‘And why is everyone so quiet, So somber -- give me a clue.’

‘Hush, child,’ [Jesus] said, ‘They’re all in shock! No one thought they’d see you.’

Well, that ends the poem, and you get it, don’t you? This fellow is walking around heaven with Jesus and thinks he’s there because he deserved it. God didn’t make a mistake with him, but all those other folks, that must be it. Again, that’s the Pharisee’s and scribes’ attitude with regard to Jesus. “We deserve to be with you, Jesus. We are worthy for you to receive us and eat with us. But these *‘tax collectors and sinners’*! How unworthy are they! What are you doing receiving them?”

But the fact is, the Pharisees and scribes are damned sinners. And our fictional fellow in the poem is a damned sinner, having no more of a right to be in heaven than any of the other sinners he could identify and didn’t expect to see there. St. Paul, too, who could write that trustworthy saying “*deserving of full acceptance,*” and worthy to be memorized, too. “*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,*” but Paul doesn’t stop there. He says, “*of whom I am the foremost.*” Paul doesn’t say he’s worthy. He doesn’t think he’s stopped sinning. Rather he says: he’s the worst; he’s the chief of sinners. Which means also that the remedy for sin applies to him, too: “*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*”

And we just sang of the remedy, and in singing it, we make it our own confession. “*Chief of sinners though I be ...*” — we claim that mantle. “*Jesus shed His blood for me ...*” — Christ did it for me. “*Died that I might live on high, Lives that I might never die*” — our Good Shepherd laid down His life and took it back up again for us, His little lambs. “*As the branch is to the vine, I am His, and He is mine*” — He calls us His sheep; and He seeks us out and brings us home.

Well, as I said, that poem was pretty good, as far as it went. And I have used it on another occasion, but not where it ends, for it’s missing the Gospel. Its message, I think, can be received as either all law — no one deserves to be in heaven, neither they nor you; or as universalism — it doesn’t really matter what you do, for everyone’s going to heaven anyway. Neither one is a good message to leave people with, for that message is deadly. It needed a better ending, I thought, and so with acknowledgements to the author for his beginning that left us with Jesus saying to the fellow, ‘No one thought they’d see you,’ I concluded it this way, with Jesus continuing:

‘But they like you are covered in blood, That cleanses them from sin.
It’s not by what the people do That they’re permitted in.
But I forgive them, sinners all, Whene’er they look to me.
Trust in My mercy and My grace And heaven’s where you’ll be.’

You don’t have to like my poetry, but it did add the Gospel to this poem no doubt still making its way around cyberspace with its incomplete Christian message—not as bad as some, but certainly not the Gospel. And that’s a thing to think about as you receive such messages and perhaps send them on.

Make sure they’re filled with the Gospel, with Jesus for them. Make sure that the recipients hear of our Shepherd who came to risk it all for us sheep who love to stray off, who came to rescue us sheep, lost and in danger. We have a Savior who came to seek and to save the lost, the aimless, the deceived. He came to bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. We have a Redeemer who shed His lifeblood as the ransom payment for a world of sinners. We have a risen Lord who continues to feed His lambs and sheep at His table by Word and Sacrament, who continues to lead His flock to quiet waters and give them Sabbath rest in good pasture, who comforts us bleating sheep and protects us in days of clouds and thick darkness, and who will lead us at length to the house of the Lord where we will dwell with Him forever.

So, be comforted all you little lambs of Jesus, who repent of your sins and listen to your Shepherd’s voice of forgiveness and rescue. Be glad at heart. Rejoice with the angels. Once you were lost; but your Shepherd has found you.

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