

September 11, 2022 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Rejoice that Jesus Welcomes Sinners!

They are precious to him

He spared no effort to rescue them

Where were you? Where were you 21 years ago today when you heard about the terrorist attack on our country? Where were you when nearly 3000 innocent citizens were killed? That tragedy etched itself into our memories. We'll never forget seeing those airplanes flying into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. Only 23 people who were in the towers when they collapsed survived. Even that could be called miraculous. The last survivor, Genelle McMillan, was rescued 27 hours after the towers collapsed. During those 27 hours, Genelle could do NOTHING to help herself. The rescuers had to find her and remove the rubble that kept her captive. If she was left to herself, she would have surely died.

This morning, in Luke 15, we meet some other people who needed to be rescued. Luke tells us, "**Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear Jesus.**" Tax collectors were even more despised at Jesus' time than they are now. Not only did they collect taxes for the hated Romans, but they often used their position and power to pad their own pockets. The Jews considered tax collectors to be traitors to their God and country. And the "sinners" Luke mentions are those people who were known for their sinful lifestyle. People like criminals who spent time in prison, the abortion doctor, the child molester, the homosexual, the drug dealer, the prostitute, etc. It was a motley crew of messed up, miserable sinners.

As Jesus met with the "sinners" the Pharisees and the teachers of the law kept on insulting him. The Pharisees and experts of the law were proud of their pious lifestyle and how they faithfully followed all of God's laws. They always made it to worship and their lives were good examples of how God's people should live. Outwardly, they looked like great people. But it was all a façade. Their hearts were dark. Their pious lifestyle was all about impressing God and others with how good they were. They even thought they were good enough to earn their way into heaven. They hated Jesus because he told them that they were sinners who needed him, a carpenter's kid from Nazareth, in order to get into heaven. When they saw Jesus spending time with such "sinners," they were glad for the opportunity to insult him. "**This man welcomes sinners,**" they mocked. Without realizing it, though, they gave one of the best summaries of the gospel.

Of course, Jesus welcomes sinners. That's why he came to earth. In fact, sinners are very precious to Jesus. He explained this point by telling two parables about a lost sheep and a lost coin. He began (:4), "**Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them.**" If companies today could cut their losses to only

1% they would be very happy. If I walked into a barnyard full of sheep, I would not notice that there were only 99 and that one was missing. But a good shepherd would notice one missing sheep because he cares about each one. The good shepherd knows that unless that lost sheep is found, it will suffer miserably and die. That one lost sheep was precious to the shepherd and he searched for it. Jesus continued (:8), "**Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one.**" This was not like us dropping a penny. Big deal. This woman only had ten coins to live on and so when she lost one, it was extremely important for her to find it. That coin was precious to her and she searched for it.

When I drive past a junk yard (an "automotive recycling center") I see a pile of useless cars, faded glory and powerless engines. They are not worth anything to me. But I know a man who restored cars for a living. To him, a junk yard was a gold mine. He could see the rusted body of an old car and get excited because he knew that he could rebuild it and make it shine as a valuable classic car. The car does not do anything. The mechanic makes it beautiful again. With our sins, we wrecked our lives and made ourselves worthless. But God knew that he could restore us and make us valuable. He sent Jesus to live and die in our place to wash away all of our sins and make us pure and holy. A lost sheep does not look for the shepherd. And a lost coin can not do anything to get found. The shepherd and the lady had to do all the work. Likewise, we do not do anything to make ourselves holy. God changes us and makes us precious.

Those tax collectors and sinners were precious to Jesus. In fact, every human being is precious to Jesus. And if every human being is precious to Jesus, then that means that you, as an individual, are precious to Jesus. How often do you hear someone say, "You have no idea"? "You have no idea how I feel." "You have no idea what I'm going through." "You have no idea what it's like to feel my hurt." When was the last time *you* felt alone, that there was not anyone who could understand what it is like to be rejected like you were, or verbally abused like you were. No matter what you have gone through, no matter what you are struggling with, no matter how bad it hurts, Jesus can look you in the eye and say, "I get it. I understand. And I came to do something about it. I came to give you a life without any sadness ever. I came to give you heaven. You are precious to me." Just as the good shepherd in the parable was concerned about one sheep out of a hundred and the woman was concerned about one coin out of ten, Jesus is concerned about you as an individual out of the almost 8 billion people on the earth. You mean so much to Jesus that he came to earth and let himself be killed so you could live. You are precious to him.

If every human being is precious to Jesus, then not only are you precious, but so is everyone else. It is so easy for us to "write off" other people as if they are not important – friends or relatives who are not living a moral life, church members who do not come to worship anymore, neighbors who laugh when you mention Jesus to them, those who have a spotted past and a dismal future. But if they are precious to Jesus, then they are also important to us. Resist the temptation to

write others off or to ignore them or to think, “They’ll never come to church.” Who is there in your life you can invite, or re-invite, to meet Jesus? Who is there in your life who needs to know about the only one who came back to life after he was dead, the only one who cleanses all consciences and forgives all sins? May God give us his Spirit that we see every sinner as precious and genuinely care about their souls and reach out to them.

Jesus did not just say that he cared. He did something about it. Jesus did not just say that sinners were precious to him, he spared no effort to rescue them. Picture this scene here in Luke 15. Jesus is sitting and talking with the dirty dregs of society. Nearby you see men who were neat and clean, someone you would like in your church, someone you could trust with your daughter. If you could look at that picture, you would guess that the tax collectors and sinners were the ones who needed to be rescued. But this is the neat twist here in Luke 15. In reality, it was the Pharisees and teachers of the law who were dying and needed to be rescued.

Don’t misunderstand Jesus’ point. He never condoned the sins of the tax collectors and sinners. He never said that it was OK for them to sin. He did not tell them to go and sin some more. He told them to go and sin no more. Jesus was talking with the tax collectors and sinners because they knew they were sinful. They knew that they did not deserve to go to heaven. They knew that they needed a Savior and they were thrilled to hear about forgiveness and eternal life for free from Jesus. They were turning away from their sin and turning to Jesus for the comfort of forgiveness and the strength to avoid sinning in the future.

The tax collectors and sinners were eager to hear Jesus and rejoice in him as their Savior, but the others mocked Jesus for associating with sinners, not realizing that they were the dirty, sinful ones. Notice how Jesus reached out to them. This is the extra grace in this story. Jesus appealed to them by inviting them into his parables. “**Suppose one of you**...How would you react? How would you feel? What would you do?” He led them to understand the urgency in God’s heart to rescue those who were lost. He described for them the joy in heaven whenever a lost sinner is found. Jesus tugged at their heart strings so they could see their guilt and look to him for help. Notice that Jesus even wanted to rescue his enemies, the people who were mocking him. And through these parables, Jesus is also reaching out to you and me this morning.

Through these parables, Jesus wants you to realize that you were the lost sheep. You were the lost coin. We were trapped under the rubble of our sin and guilt and Jesus rescued us. But we can also see ourselves in the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. We come to church and support the church with our offerings and our efforts. As people who carry the name of Christ to a dying world, we are careful with our language so we do not curse or swear or use foul potty words. People see us striving to live a moral lifestyle instead of joining in the sins of the world and probably think that we are pretty good people. But others

can not see into our hearts like we can. Even though we may look like pious people on the outside, they do not see that there are plenty of sinful thoughts in our minds. People can not see that while we strive to live the moral lifestyle that Christians should, our hearts are often just as hypocritical as the Pharisees in Luke 15. Our sinful nature keeps suggesting to us that we are better than others, that our sins are not as bad as theirs. You and I know the deep secret in our hearts that we are not holy, that we need a Savior just as much as anyone else.

It required a lot of effort for that shepherd to find his lost sheep. It meant a lot more than just walking a few yards out of the way. The shepherd had to search throughout the countryside, walking several miles and looking behind every rock and checking in every crevice. To the shepherd though, it did not matter how much effort it took. He wanted to rescue that sheep. The same can be said of the woman who lost her coin. She got out her broom and swept her dirt floor very carefully. She moved all the furniture. She got on her hands and knees and crawled around with a lamp to find that coin. She did not care how long it took or what she had to do. She was going to find that coin.

Jesus showed that same determination to rescue sinners such as you and me and the whole world. It took more than a few dollars and a few hours. His search for you led him from the glory and grandeur of his heavenly home down into our world. Jesus lived his entire life as a perfect substitute for you and gave you credit for his perfect life. His search for you led him up Calvary’s hill where he let his pure blood be poured out on the cross for you. Jesus gave his all. He spared no effort to save sinners. Through his life and death, he freed you from your sins. You are forgiven! He gave you eternal life. You are going to heaven! Jesus invites sinners like us to eat at his table at the heaving wedding banquet. Jesus already saved you. You can rejoice!

The parables of the lost sheep and coin have happy endings. The shepherd found the sheep, carried it home on his shoulders and had a party to rejoice. The lady found the coin and had a party to rejoice. At this very moment as you recognize your sinfulness and hang on to Jesus for forgiveness and life, God and the angels are giving each other high-fives and dancing with delight. Yes, we are sinners, but Jesus welcomes sinners and for that, we rejoice here and eternally. Amen.