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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, September 11, 2022
14th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 24/Year C

First Reading: Exodus 32:7-14

Second Reading: 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Gospel Reading: Luke 15:1-10

Sermon Title: “Sinners Welcome Here”

Theme

The grumbling of the religious leaders in today’s gospel is actually our holy hope: This Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. That our God seeks and saves the lost is not only a holy hope, it is our only hope. As the writer of 1 Timothy reminds us, “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” Thanks be to God.

Texts:

First Reading: Exodus 32:7-14

⁷The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’ ” ⁹The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

¹¹But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’ ”

¹⁴And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Second Reading: 1 Timothy 1:12-17

¹²I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, ¹³even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel: Luke 15:1-10

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus.] ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³So he told them this parable: ⁴“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Sermon

We who are regular in attendance are not surprised by these readings prescribed for the day even though I find them oddly prescribed together.

In the First Reading, we have the wacky story of the post-Exodus event. Forgive me, but I just have to tell you this:

The actual Exodus, including the flight from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, is complete by Exodus chapter 14. Immediately the Israelites started whining:

"The water is nasty. We have no fresh water. Why did you bring us out to this desert to die of thirst?" So Moses threw a stick in the oasis and the water turned sweet.

"We're hungry. We have nothing to eat. Why did you bring us out to this desert to die of hunger?" So God gave them manna.

"We're tired of manna and water. We have nothing but manna to eat. Why did you bring us out to this desert to die of hunger?" So God gave them quail.

They moved and there was no water at the new location and guess what? They whined, "There's no water here. We have no fresh water. Why did you bring us out to this desert to die of thirst?" So Moses struck a rock with his staff and water flowed out of it.

They encountered the evil Amalekites and whined, "Why did you bring us out into this desert to be slaughtered by our enemies?" God told Moses that as long as he raised his staff, the Israelites would prevail. And so they did.

Beginning in chapter 20, God called Moses up to the summit of Mt. Sinai and began dictating the Ten Commandments and hundreds of other ordinances and decrees, ordained the priesthood, and gave instructions in great detail for the construction of the Tabernacle. While Moses was up on Mt. Sinai communing with God and getting all these instructions, the people observed the smoke and thunder and lightning and presumed Moses was vaporized. So what did they do? They whined. "Why did you bring us out in this desert to get vaporized by the God of Moses?" And their solution was to take up an offering of gold and cast it into a golden calf so

that they could worship it! They made an idol with their own hands, and worshiped it!

Finally to the First Reading from Exodus 32, God saw what was going on at the base of the mountain and told Moses that he was so furious that he was going to consume them with fire! Thankfully, Moses, who had been the lightning rod for all the whining of the Israelites, intervened and talked God down. Mercy.

If you have paid attention to my sermons lately, then you may have noticed a theme in the recent Gospel Readings. Jesus's ministry was attracting sinners. He challenged the ethics of the Jewish religious establishment and was often at odds with them, and at the same time revealed what he taught was the true loving, graceful, and merciful nature of his Heavenly Father.

So we are not surprised, that in today's Gospel Reading, the Jewish religious establishment was heard mumbling, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

In that way Jesus always had, he knew what was in their hearts and so he told them the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. The point of each parable was that God revealed in Jesus Christ is not only concerned with those who are the clean, obedient, and faithful, but also, and maybe even shows preferential concern for the one that is lost, the one the Jewish religious establishment had excluded, the one who could not afford to comply with the 613 commandments, decrees, and ordinances. This is a teaching that the Jewish religious establishment, the clean, obedient, and faithful didn't want to hear. And we can understand that, right? We are the ones who are here every week. We are the ones who obediently give our offerings, we are the ones who live up to the example Jesus gave us to the best of our ability, right?

True story: When I pastored the little church up north, we were making plans for a major expansion of the building including the parking lot. I suggested that in addition to handicapped parking close to the building, we reserve some spots for visitors. One long-time member opposed the idea, stating, "Why don't we reserve the best spots for the "paying members?""

Moving on to the Second Reading, the apostle Paul wrote Timothy and in his letter reminded him that though he, Paul, used to be one of the Jewish religious establishment, one of the clean, obedient, and faithful, after his conversion, he realized that he "¹³acted ignorantly in unbelief." He confessed that he was "^{13a}blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence." And yet, ... even for him, and to him, Jesus Christ revealed the love, grace, and mercy of God.

If you are not familiar with Paul, formerly known as Saul, he was a Jewish zealot – zealot meaning he acted with fanaticism, and exuberance. He was convinced that if the Jews could just get their collective act together the Messiah would come. And so, yes, he persecuted the Christians, because they were the problem. They were the ones contaminating the one true faith of Judaism. They were the ones preventing the Messiah from coming. But, as I quoted him last weekend, after he came to know Jesus, whom he came to identify as Lord and Christ, he realized that all he thought he knew was rubbish.

Philippians 3:7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

In today's Second Reading from First Timothy, Paul, by then the humble servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, wrote that he concluded that he was "¹⁵the foremost" of sinners.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Brothers and sisters in Christ, while I would argue with Paul, that I am the foremost of sinners, and you may claim that dubious distinction for yourself, it's not a competition. My message for us today is that sinners are welcome here.

What all three readings teach us today is that all fall short of our creator's expectations. And yet we do not get what we deserve. We who come to worship each week, hear the word of the Lord proclaimed and are confronted with our sinfulness.

Today we are reminded that, like the ancient Israelites, we routinely whine for what we think we deserve when what we deserve is God's wrath.

And like the first century Jews, sometimes we regular attenders, we insiders, think a lot of ourselves and need to be reminded that we are not all that special, that we too miss the mark of the example of godly living Jesus gave us.

And as Paul taught Timothy, we need to humble ourselves, accept the forgiveness that God in Christ alone can give, and commit to doing better.

In a few moments, we will again be invited to the Lord's Holy Supper where we hear those words, "This is my body and blood given for you for the forgiveness of sins." ^{Romans 5:8} God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

The only appropriate response is to give God in Christ our thanks and praise, and then leave here forgiven and fed, to tell others of the Good news of God's great love, grace, and mercy.

We don't get what we deserve. What we get is hope. Hope Happens Here.

Prayer

Loving, graceful, merciful God, forgive us when we think too highly of ourselves and get angry at you and the world for not doing enough for us. Rather, remind us that you are God and we are your creation, created to love and serve you and the creation you love. Help us to acknowledge your love, grace, and mercy so that we can share it with the world you love. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen