

Receives Sinners, and Eats With Them

Luke 15:1-10

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

What was the purpose for which the 2nd person of the Trinity, the very Word of God who with the Father spoke all things into being at the creation of the world, took on human flesh and was born of the Virgin Mary? Yes, why did Jesus Christ come into the world?

Did He not come to seek and to save that which was lost? For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.

Why would God condemn the world? For the same reason He destroyed all life except that which was in the ark – because of the rampant wickedness, because of the sinfulness of man. But just as He saved eight in the ark by His grace, so He desires to save today.

Dear friends, please listen carefully to the questions I am about to ask and the ultimate response.

What is the goal of this congregation?

Is it to keep the doors of this church open so that you can have a place from which to be buried? Then close it down tight and lock it up forever.

Is the goal of this congregation to have a beautiful building which we can worship and revere into eternity? Then close it down tight and lock it up forever.

Is the goal of this congregation to remain open because this church has been a part of our family history? It is where grandma and grandpa were baptized, confirmed, married, and buried... great-grandma and great-grandpa were founding members here, and by their own hands, helped erect this church building we are in? Then close it down tight and lock it up forever.

Is it a place for different social organization to meet so that we can connect with our friends? Then close it down tight and lock it up forever.

I am hope you are still listening. What I say next is important as well.

None of those things are bad. I do not know where I will be buried from. I like to visit churches and admire the gorgeous architecture., the theology exhibited in them. I wish I had a congregation where I could say, “that is where generations of my family have been baptized, confirmed, married and buried.” Since Pauline and I have been married, we have held membership in seven congregations, and in a number of them, we have been told, “This is not your church, you are just the pastor.”

I would love to have more opportunities to gather here for social activities. And of course, having a place to gather with people who share my confession of faith? What a grand opportunity to declare them my brothers and sister in faith!

But dear friends, I still ask with all seriousness, and we really need to consider a few questions. What is the vision of this congregation? For what purpose was this congregation begun so many years ago? Was there even a purpose? Yes, there was! Whether it was St. Peter, St. John, or Zion, they were begun so that the founding members did not have to take all day to travel to and from church. They wanted a place where Jesus, “This man,” “receives sinners and eats with them!”

This year, it is 140 years since both St. Peter and St. John were founded, and 130 years since Zion was founded. Our Lutheran Church Missouri Synod was founded 171 years ago.

These congregations were begun because they had a specific confession of faith, a confession that was so different from the faith confessions of the other congregations nearby, that they began these churches. They want to gather around Jesus Christ, in Word and Sacrament in a specific manner – so that they, sinners, might gather with Jesus and eat with Him.

They also began these congregations because they thought their specific confession of faith, was worth bringing to the area. They wanted to train their own families in that faith, but they also wanted to bring that unique confession to others, that they might also join them. It was their hope that Jesus would receive other sinners and eat with them – all together.

As some will celebrate Fathers' Day today, we could talk about the churches of our fathers – those from the history of the LCMS, Zion, St. Peter, St. John – and the incredible story of each. I think you would prefer a sermon under an hour, so we will leave off the history lessons.

But, at our District Convention we were given some demographic information about congregations and church bodies across the US. As you might guess, there is good news and bad news. First, there is not a church body anywhere that is not experiencing a decline in membership. But, of the mainline denominations, the LCMS is fairing much better than those denominations which have watered down their doctrine in order to be acceptable and appealing to society.

But do you know what is the really good news? There are many lost sheep and coins out there who do not have any church affiliation. They are out there, lost - They are sin-sick. They are hurting in mind, body, and spirit. They need the good news of the Gospel. And dear friends, you and I have the very best news to offer them.

Do you?

You meet people every day who are dying – maybe eternally – they are dying to hear good news. Shattered lives because disease, illness, broken relationships, or even broken homes. People dealing with loneliness and depression, possibly even considering suicide. Those things just for starters.

Studies show that there are people hungry for what Jesus would offer them – for what His Church has to offer them. And that message should be coming to them from your mouths. You do not need to do anything more than meet them where they are, tell them they are in your prayers, ask if you can help in any way.

And yes, if you truly believe the Gospel, if you truly believe that the Word of God can heal the broken-mess of sin, then you also have a place to suggest they might come for healing of heart and mind.

Zion, St. Peter, St. John are the places where Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. They are the places where God does miraculous things.

Did you hear Jesus? "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 'Just 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.

OK, which man would leave the 99 in the wilderness to find the one that wandered off? Grumbling scribes and Pharisees! Are we the grumbling Pharisees? Do we seek out the lost, those who have forgotten where home is? Or, do we think... "They can hear the rest of sheep bleating here together in this field, we have not moved – we have been in the same place for some hundred plus years. If they want to come home, they know where we are!"

Sorry, that is not how Jesus thinks. He leaves the 99 to go find the one lost.

"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when 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.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Lost something and searched for it frantically? Been there! Done that! When I lose something, how I search drives Pauline nuts till I find it. But, are we grumbling Pharisees? If I only had so much money, and I lost a tenth of all my money, when I found it, I certainly would not spend twenty percent to celebrate finding ten percent. That is just crazy!

Or is it?

Tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to hear Jesus – those who knew of their sinfulness, those hurting inside, those who were dying to hear some good news, were drawing near to hear Jesus. So, Jesus spoke to them, He ate with them – in fact, if you remember, He fed them – on a couple different occasions.

The leaders of the church could not believe what He was doing. He was caring for the undesirables. He was reaching out into the community. He was taking His message and His presence to "those people."

You dear friends were the lost sheep. You were the lost coin. The angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner who repents – they rejoice over your repentance. Christ gave all His wealth to seek you, to find you, to save you – He gave His life unto death to redeem you.

Thank goodness that "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

More than that, He gives all He is to throw the party to celebrate. He gives His very lifeblood, shed upon the cross to pay for the food and drink. He sets the table before sinners, He is both host and meal. In fact, He only receives sinners. He only receives those who acknowledge their sinfulness and come to hear Him speak words of forgiveness – and to abide at His table to receive the meal of His grace.

Jesus receives sinners and eats with them.

Jesus receives me and eats with me.

Jesus receives you and eats with you.

More than that, Jesus sought you, found you, feeds and nourishes you, and the angels in heaven rejoice in your repentance unto life everlasting. Amen.