

Trinity III (25 June 2023)

“I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.”

+In the Name...

A priest, a Jehovah's Witness, and a Bible thumper meet on a street corner... It sounds like the beginning of a joke, but it really happened just a block away from this church earlier this week: I was walking to mail a letter at the mailbox on the corner of 22nd and Lovejoy. As some of you may know, there are usually two Jehovah's Witnesses on the corner, with their tract rack on wheels. There is usually a man and a woman, but the staffing varies. I always make a point to say “hello” to them, and with some of them I have chit-chatted, although never about religion. This particular day in question, the two Jehovah's Witnesses were listening as a man spoke

to them very intently about the Good News. It was so very Portland, as the man doing the talking was motioning toward his book with great gusto. He interrupted his monologue to greet me with “shabbat shalom”, which I returned, and then he went back to his diatribe. But the book he was holding was not the Bible or even the Torah, or anyone’s holy book so far as I know, but a book about gardening. I wondered briefly if it was just a catchy title with some sort of agricultural play on words, but it was Ed Hume’s (or some person’s name) guide to growing a flower garden. He had another book tucked under his arm; perhaps it was the Bible he thought he was motioning to.

As entertaining as this scene was, none of us were probably following the Gospel reading from this morning, not that I was really planning to when I left the church for the sole purpose of mailing a letter. Jesus gives us two parables in today’s reading, the Lost Sheep

and the Lost Coin, but they have the same message: God's love is so comprehensive that He is seeking out every lost soul, no matter how insignificant a soul might be, or more accurately, how insignificant it might *seem* to be. The Pharisees and scribes were perfectly content to stand by, welcoming a repentant sinner knowing that God would do the same, but to make an effort to *seek out* those lost souls was a concept completely alien to them. That is the same today: when was the last time a Jewish missionary came to your door? Exactly: never, because there is no such thing. (Jews for Jesus do not count because they are attempting to convert others to Christianity, not Judaism.)

Least of all would God seek out an unrepentant sinner, such as a publican, a recurring bane of the existence of other Jews. Publicans were worse than the Roman tax collectors because at least the Romans were working for their own government. Publicans were Jews who

worked for the Roman government by collecting taxes, so they were viewed as traitors.

You can see the disdain the Jews held for Jesus at the very beginning of the reading: “And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, ‘This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.’” I am picturing well-dressed, older people in a fancy hotel lobby bar: “Well, you didn’t hear it from me, but I heard from the milkman, whose wife is the receptionist for Dr. Goldman, that his daughter is dating a... *publican!*” And in case you think my story is fictional (technically it is) or relegated to the 1950s, or at least a time well before 2023, let me share a story with you: I attended a funeral here in Portland a couple of months back. I met a woman from Salem who was lamenting the fact that she lived near a high school, and the students leave their litter in her front yard. She told me that she put a sign in her yard asking them not to litter, but they stole her sign. So she put a garbage can

with another sign asking them to use the bin, but they stole both of those too. “I think they must be...” she paused to look around, “Republicans!” she practically whispered, as if just saying the word would bring down thunderbolts. I was waiting for the explanation of how she had reached that conclusion; something like they left Trump literature on her front porch. By the look on her face, I was obviously supposed to make the connection that I was failing to make. “Because only Republicans steal...?” I finally ventured. “Don’t you ever watch Fox news?” she asked indignantly. “They lie!” For the sake of argument, let’s say that everything on Fox news is a lie. Aside from the mental leap one has to make then that all liars are thieves, I was still stunned. I just smiled and nodded. Maybe I said something like, “I see.” Yes, I am sure the Salem high schools are a hot bed of Teen Age Republicans! But even if they are, even if the woman I met at that funeral that cold January day was right on about everything she said

(and I am not claiming that she was), if she is a Christian she does not get to write off a group of people as being so abhorrent to God that they are not worthy of His time or salvation. (I did not tell her she would be a good Pharisee.) But of course, we all can be that way about one thing or another: perhaps not political party, but maybe religion, race, kind of car one drives, or cleanliness.

Yesterday the Church celebrated the feast of St. John the Baptist. He may not have been the best example of evangelism. Well, he took it seriously, but his approach may not be amenable to the average 21st century American. As you may remember, he was our Lord's cousin, but he had odd attire (camel's hair), an odd diet, (locusts and wild honey), and a less than endearing manner: he once called those he was trying to convert a "brood of vipers". I imagine one could argue that my attire is no stranger to contemporary society than his was to 1st century Palestine. In the East he is called John the

Forerunner because he foretold the coming Messiah. But unlike the other prophets, John the Baptist straddled both the Old and New Testaments: he was a prophet who warned of the coming Messiah, but he actually got to see and meet that Messiah! At the eve of his feast, we read from the prophet Jeremiah, where God tells him that when he was still in the belly, that is, before he was born, God knew him and formed him and chose work for him. As humans we have freewill, but that does not mean that God does not choose a path for each of us, we just have the freedom to reject that path. Our job is to discover how our path will allow us to help reach the lost sheep, to find the lost coin. The parable does not mean the other 99 sheep are not important, but in these parables we Christians play the part of the shepherd or the woman, not the other sheep or the other coins.

So, what is the punchline of my joke from the beginning? Maybe there isn't one. My humor tends to fall flat in sermons anyhow. But

remember that while we were formed in the belly by God, so were the people who do not yet know Him, so by playing our part we are not just fulfilling God's will for us, but helping someone else to fulfill God's will for him too. Who is the one God has put in your life that needs bringing back to the fold? It could be a Jehovah's Witness. It could be a Bible-thumper. It could even be... {Gasp!} a Republican! Pray brethren that we strive so to follow Our Lord: if He could sit down with publicans and sinners, we have no reason to think that we should be exempt from doing the same.

+In the Name