

## A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Trinity, July 2, 2006

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The gospel (Luke 15:1f.) tells us: "Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receives sinners, and eats with them."

The word *sinner* here is a technical term for a non-observant Jew, one who did not live his life according to the teaching of the Torah and the tradition of the rabbis. The Pharisees believed that Jews who were zealous for the Torah would be declared righteous by God in the judgment. They believed that zeal for the Torah was the means of salvation for Israel. Non-observant Jews, Jews who were not zealous to obey the Torah, undermined the very hope of Israel. They were not righteous, they were sinners.

Jesus brought a new twist into this distinction. As St. John says, "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The Torah was understood to be the written word of God and one's devotion to it was the mark of one's righteousness. In Jesus, the Torah was made flesh. Thus, faith in Jesus is the new mark of righteousness.

This means that those who were sinners by the old standard but who put their faith in Jesus Christ became righteous thereby. And those who were righteous by the former religious standard but rejected Jesus Christ were made sinners thereby.

The new community created by this new definition is portrayed in the gospel. The tax collectors and sinners gathered around Jesus, symbolizing the new community of the redeemed. The supposedly righteous religious leaders found themselves on the outside looking in.

Jesus said there is joy in heaven over this new arrangement. "There shall be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents more than over ninety and nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Jesus' use of the word *righteous* here is sarcastic. He does not mean that there are, in fact, ninety-nine people who do not need to repent. He means that there is no joy in heaven over those who think they don't need the cross.

Now, the Pharisees were manifestly religious people. This tells us that there is a danger in religion, for the Pharisees missed the mark. The Torah pointed to Jesus the Messiah. The Pharisees claimed to be zealous for the Torah, but rejected the one who came in fulfillment of it.

When Jesus came, the old religion of Torah and temple gave way to the new religion of Christ, who is the Torah incarnate and the new temple. The form of *our* religion, likewise, has a planned obsolescence. We will celebrate the Eucharist only "until his coming again."

We will be ready for that day inasmuch as we see through the forms of our faith to ultimate realities they represent. Our religion is not about the liturgy and the church building as ends in and of themselves. Our religion is about the call to repent and putting our faith in Jesus as Lord. The liturgy and the church have value inasmuch as they point us toward Jesus Christ. We must always look

forward to the day when our current religion of Word and Sacrament will give way to the greater experience of God's immediate presence.

Now, to understand the gospel we need to understand what it means to repent. When Jesus said there was joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, just what is it that the sinner did to cause such joy? The word *repent* means literally, "to have a change of mind." It means that we begin to look at life in a new way because we have come to know that Jesus is Lord—whereas we formerly lived in ignorance of him. To repent means to have what is sometimes called a "sea change" in our thinking.

One thing that undermines a proper understanding of repentance is our cultural tendency to privatize religion; to make religion something we do in church but which has no real impact on the rest of life. The idea that repentance means primarily to confess our private sins contributes to this false idea. Thus, people go to church to confess private sins or find personal comfort and then go back into the world to live lives otherwise unchanged by faith.

We see the essential nature of repentance in the story of St. Matthew, our patron saint. He was a tax collector, subject to the ridicule of the supposedly righteous. His repentance was not merely his sudden awareness and confession of his personal greed. His repentance was that change in world view and life style that occurred because he came to see that Jesus is Lord.

The real point of repentance is this: Jesus is Lord of all creation. What is the implication of this truth to each and every aspect of my life? If Jesus is Lord, how should I conduct business? If Jesus is Lord, how should I order my family? If Jesus is Lord, how should I arrange my time? If Jesus is Lord, what does this say about my use of media? The answers to these questions are not always easy to find and implement, but these are essential questions for those who want to heed the call to repent.

In the early church there was a list of professions that the church deemed incompatible with Christian faith. The early church believed that Jesus is Lord and that a Christian ought not to be occupied with things that do not honor him. For our own ongoing practice of repentance, we need to think more about the larger questions of how we are to live all of life in service to Christ.

One purpose of the church building is to remind us of the true nature of things in opposition to the false values of the world. Here we remember that Christ and his cross is the centerpiece of human history. Here we remember that Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father as Lord and King. Here we remember that Jesus is coming again to judge the world. It is a cause of great joy in heaven when we take these truths to heart and begin to change our lives accordingly.