

SINNERS WELCOME

“Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to Jesus to listen to him; but the Pharisees and Scribes complained:

‘Imagine! This Jesus welcomes sinners, he even *eats* with them!’”

They were angry with Jesus: very angry... *furiosus*! The Scribes and the Pharisees: the good ones, ... the clean ones, ... the law-abiding, ... the learned, ... the religious ones, ... the pillars of the Temple ...; angry... *furiosus*... because Jesus sat down table and dined with sinners: the bad ones, ... dirty ones, ... disobedient ones, ... immoral ones, ... those who never crossed the door of the Temple Synagogue!

Sisters and brothers, it’s in this context that Jesus shares with the three powerful stories that we have heard since childhood:

- about the man who leaves 99 obedient sheep alone to look for the lost one;
- about the housewife who does not bother about the seven coins in her apron pocket but turns the whole house over – looking for the lost one;
- followed by the familiar story of the father who organizes a party for his good-for-nothing son who blew his inheritance on women and drink!

Sisters and brothers, why were the “good people” – “religious people” *so furiosus* that Jesus joined the sinners at table? What got under their skin?

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Well just imagine for a moment that Jesus sends a heavenly messenger (maybe Gabriel or Michael) to inform us that he was coming here to Syracuse for a pastoral visit at the end of the month

Just imagine: the choirs would be practicing...; buildings spruced-up: everything freshly painted...; large churches and small churches alike would put out our banners and streamers and flowers in hopeful expectation... .

And of course the big question will be: “He’s only staying a day, so where is he going to visit and where is he going to stop first?”

... And rumor has it that the Secret Service thinks he’s coming to the east side first!

We at All Saints might think: well, he’ll probably stop here first because, of course, the Catholic Church is the one true church that goes back to the apostles and parking is terrible at the Cathedral ... *and* we are the only Catholic Church in the city that is growing in number. Pretty good chances!

The folks up at Hendricks Chapel are pretty sure he might stop there first because, after all, Syracuse University is pretty prestigious with folks coming from all over the world to go there... *and* perhaps Jesus likes a good football game!

Even Rabbi Feldman and folks at Temple Concord on Madison Street are hopeful that he might stop there first – because after all Jesus was Jewish *and* probably would love a good Jewish meal!

And, guess what? Jesus comes. He really comes: pulls off Route 81 downtown – wearing an “I’m for the grid” button – but he doesn’t stop at All Saints (or the Cathedral); he doesn’t stop at Hendrick’s Chapel or Temple Concord; he doesn’t visit any church or synagogue.

His first stop is to join the guys at the Oxford Inn for a cup of coffee...; he spends the afternoon with some fishermen on Onondaga Lake who never go to church...; he invites a couple of folks just out of jail (who know our Sr. Maura by the way) to join him for dinner...; he shares a late night pizza with some of the women of the night and then, goes back to ‘the Ox’ to sleep.

Can you imagine... what the reaction might be? How all the religious people might feel...? the Scribes and Pharisees were furious... and: some of us just might be too!

What is Jesus trying to tell us? What is his point? What is his message in these stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the prodigal son?

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First: In the world that God intends there is *radical inclusiveness*. To put it simply: everybody is included... no one and no people are excluded; all are welcome... *even sinners* — contrary to what the Scribes and Pharisees thought.

Like the Scribes and Pharisees, we have been taught who to like and who not to like, ...who to rub shoulders with and who to avoid, ...who to love and who to hate.

A parish, a church that is trying to be faithful to Jesus is a church that is always striving for inclusiveness; a church where all are welcome to the Table of the Lord; a church where there are no “insiders” and “outsiders.” We must remain constantly vigilant to our commitment to be such an inclusive community.

Second: Jesus was warning the ‘religious ones’ of the danger of self-righteousness: “*We’re following the law...*”; “*We’ve got it and the others don’t...*”; a tendency to judge others and dismiss them. Jesus reminds us that when we point a finger at someone — three fingers are pointing back at us!

Third: In these stories, Jesus teaches us a point that our Pope Francis has made the mandate in his tenure: we are all sinners and yet our God is a forgiving God, a merciful God, a God who loves us unconditionally and that – created in God’s image – we are called to do the same:

- the shepherd didn’t say to the lamb: “If you wander off one more time, you’re headed for the barbecue!”
- the woman didn’t say to the coin: “If you get lost one more time, I’m not going to look for you!”
- the father didn’t say to the prodigal son: “If you screw up again, don’t even think about coming home!”

I’d like to close with the story of a Bishop who is interviewing an RCIA Candidate:

“So you have been converted to Christ?”

“Yes!”

“Then you must know a great deal about him.

Tell me: what country was he born in?”

“I don’t know.”

“What was his age when he died?”

“I don’t know.”

“How many sermons did he preach?”

“I don’t know.”

“You certainly know very little for man who claims to be converted to Christ!”

“You are right. I am ashamed at how little

I know about him. But this much I do know:

Three years ago I was a drunkard. I was in

debt. My family was falling to pieces. My wife

and children would dread my return home each evening.

But now I have given up drink; we are out of debt; ours is

now a happy home; my children eagerly wait for my return

home each evening. All this Christ has done for me.

This much I know of Christ!”

Amen!