

Luke 15:1–10 (Trinity III)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
July 3, 2022

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

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

“The Church is filled with hypocrites!” When people give reasons why they’ve left the church or why they don’t go to church, that’s usually at the top of the list. “The Church is filled with hypocrites!” To give such a reason is only possible because the average person is utterly confused about the Church. Most people in their ignorance believe the Church is a club for good people, or a society for the propagation of morals, or a last-ditch effort to save western culture. If the Church really were any of those things, then yes, the Church is filled with hypocrites, with people acting like they’re better than everyone else. But that’s not what the Church is. A member of the Christian Church will be the first to admit with the Apostle Paul: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (1 Tim 1:15). We confess our sins every Sunday, calling ourselves “poor, miserable sinners” who have sinned in thought, word and deed. A Christian doesn’t pretend to be better than everyone else. A Christian recognizes his own sin and a Christian recognizes his Savior from sin, our Lord Jesus Christ. The Church is not filled with good people. The Church is filled with sinners who admit their sins and are accounted righteous before God. When people say: “The Church is filled with hypocrites!” what they mean is: “The Church is filled with sinners!” But the Church has admitted that since the beginning.

We need to keep in mind that there’s also a bit of confusion because not everyone who goes to Church is a Christian. In the outward fellowship of the Christian Church, there are many false Christians mixed in. There always have been and there always will be. The weeds grow among the wheat. Many are members of the Church because that’s how they were raised, or

because that's what they married into, or because the Church is a worthwhile social outlet. But that's not what the Church is all about. Even a Christian child knows that what the Church really is at its core is a fellowship of believers, the sheep who hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. Jesus says: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). The true Church is God's little flock, and Jesus, the Good Shepherd, often has to go out to find His wandering sheep.

The hypocrites are those who stand outside the Church, pointing their fingers at Jesus and saying: "This man receives sinners and eats with them." That's what the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled against Jesus. Tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to hear the Lord. The sheep heard their Shepherd's voice and followed Him. From the outside this was a great scandal. The Pharisees and the scribes seemed to be doing everything right. They were pious and paid attention to how they walked before God. Yet Jesus came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32). Those who think they are well have no need of a doctor, but those who are sick. Those who try to make themselves look good to God and others have a long way to go, but those who admit their sins are well on their way to healing. The Pharisees and scribes meant it as an insult: "This man receives sinners and eats with them." But it's true and it's a wonderful thing! If Jesus didn't receive sinners, we'd all be lost.

Jesus rejoices in finding what was lost and bringing people to salvation. In Luke 19:10 that's how Jesus characterizes His entire purpose in becoming man. He says: "the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." Jesus began with the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt 15:24), but His seeking and saving continued among both Jew and Gentile from Jerusalem to Samaria, to Judea, to the ends of the earth. The prophet Isaiah says that "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way" (53:6). All people are like sheep who

have gone astray. In the beginning, God created us exactly the way we were supposed to be. Everything was good. But man decided to wander from God the way a sheep wanders from the shepherd. Adam and Eve closed their ears to God's Word and so they were deceived by the Serpent. They fell into sin. They fell into a hole too deep to get out of on their own. But the Shepherd came looking for the sheep. Adam and Eve heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden and they hid themselves in fear. The sheep were afraid of the Shepherd. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him: "Where are you?" (Gen 3:9). The LORD God promised a Redeemer and made garments of skin to cover their shame.

In Adam's Fall all mankind fell. All people from the beginning of the world until today until the end of time are under sin. No one is righteous; no one understands; no one seeks God. But the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost. God became man to die on the cross for the sins of the world and draw all people to Himself (John 12:32). All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, *and* are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom 3:23-24). God has consigned all to disobedience that He might have mercy on all (Rom 11:32). All mankind is lost, but that's precisely why Jesus came: to seek and save the lost, to seek and save the sheep who have wandered, to seek and save all people, even though many reject Him.

In His death and resurrection from the dead, Jesus brought back the wandering sheep. He left His home in eternity and entered into time to seek us out. Jesus snatched us out of the jaws of the Devil and defeated sin and death for us. In Holy Baptism our Good Shepherd placed you upon His shoulders and carried you back to the fold, back to the people of God's pasture. By nature you were lost, but now you are found! Your sin separated you from God, but Jesus Christ

overcame that divide by laying down His life for the sheep and by giving you a new life in Baptism. And so there is joy in Heaven.

Yet as sheep we continue to wander, maybe not completely away from the fold, but we can come awfully close. We are sheep who hear the voice of Jesus, our Shepherd and we follow Him. But danger still surrounds us on every side. There are allurements all around us. How do we, as sheep, get lost? We lose our way when we stop listening to the voice of our Shepherd in Holy Scripture. There are many other voices out there, crying out to us to follow after them. There's the voice of pleasure, telling us to enjoy life a little more and not worry so much about the demands of God's Law. There's the draw of friendship with the world as an alternative to the foolishness of the Gospel. There's the prospect of wealth and happiness in this life. There's so much out there to distract us from the voice of Jesus, our Shepherd. And when we close our ears to the Good Shepherd and follow where our sinful urges and desires lead us, we end up falling into sin. This is not just a theoretical danger for Christians. Sin is a daily reality. We are redeemed by the blood of Jesus, but our sinful flesh still clings to. The world and the Devil entice us away from the flock.

Yet even then, Jesus seeks us out and saves us. When we spiritually wander away from the flock by following other voices, Jesus, our Good Shepherd, comes after us to bring us home. He goes after the one lost sheep in the open country until He finds it. When we fall into sin, Jesus comes to us with His Word, calling us to repentance. He lets His Word ring out, calling us back to Him. In the mirror of God's Law we become aware of how far we have again fallen. We are led to honestly confess our sins and our daily struggles. As 1 John 1:8–9 says: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The shepherd leaving

the 99 to find the one lost sheep is not just about the initial salvation we have in Jesus Christ. It's about how Jesus daily seeks and saves us when we are straying from Him. In His suffering and death and now in His Word of forgiveness, in His Word of Absolution, Jesus delivers us from all our spiritual enemies. Jesus alone is the Shepherd and Jesus alone must do everything for our salvation, or else we would die in the desert of sin.

So, dear sheep of God's pasture, the Shepherd has come to fetch you. Sit at the feet of Jesus with the other sinners. Draw near to Him and hear Him. Listen to the Word of God as it diagnoses your sin. Confess your sins daily and receive God's forgiveness daily for the times you wander away, or for the times you are tempted to follow another voice besides the voice of your Shepherd. Earnestly hear and learn from the Gospel of Jesus Christ that all your sins are forgiven because of His death and resurrection. The Church is not a club for good people or a society for the promotion of morality. No, the Church is the sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd. The Church is God's little flock that He's always rescuing from danger. The Church is filled with sinners because Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. Come now, dear sinners forgiven by the blood of Jesus. Our LORD is ready to eat with you too. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.