

Holy Wednesday
“REPENTANCE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS”
Wednesday, April 4, 2007
TEXT: Luke 15:1-7
Pastor Chad E. Hoover

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

Jesus said, “There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

Wouldn't it be nice to be one of the ninety-nine? No need to repent! No need to say, “I'm sorry!” Only the satisfaction of knowing, “I am righteous” – which is to say, “I am always *right!* Never wrong and (as you can see from our reading this evening), God is very impressed.” Yeah, it would be nice to have that honorable distinction on your resume. “I am a righteous person.”

Where are these righteous people? I'm certainly not one of them. Not one of you here is one of them either. In fact, with the exception of Jesus of Nazareth, there is not one person who has ever or will ever be righteous to the point that they do not *need* to repent!

And that, of course, is the great irony in Christ's statement. In saying this, He was really speaking against the Pharisees who, by their self-righteous attitude, excluded themselves from any need to repent. These words of Christ are not just for them, but also for you. They ought to cut to the heart because like the Pharisees, it's tempting for us to develop a self-righteous attitude as well.

Or perhaps, in our sinful stubbornness, we simply refuse to acknowledge our sin and confess it before God and man. Or maybe that's too harsh? Perhaps, we're just determined to have a *glass-is-half-full* mentality. After all, life sure would be a lot easier and less humiliating to skip the whole confession of sins bit and focus on those good things that we've done. Why do we have to be so negative and confess our sins over and over and over again. It's depressing!

It seems to be a basic human propensity to never admit error. Admission of guilt is a sign of weakness. Nobody wants to do that. In fact, we are encouraged in our culture never to do that! Even if you are wrong, even if you have made a mistake, never admit it, never 'fess up. Especially in a court of law where a jury of your peers could convict you of crime and sentence your prison! Stick to your guns! Stand firm in your convictions.

But what happens when you cannot stand any longer? When the weight of your sins becomes too great a burden for you to bear on your own. What then?

Why then, you're like that little lamb . . . lost and alone . . . separated from the safety and comfort of the flock. This is the image that Christ gives for a sinner: a lost sheep.

(Now, the ninety-nine sheep would not be abandoned. In normal Palestinian practice, more than one shepherd would watch over the flock. If one of the sheep was lost, just one of those shepherds would go out to look for it).

A lost sheep that has been separated from the flock will lie down helplessly and refuses to budge (sounds similar to our sinful stubbornness, doesn't it?). The only way the sheep can be brought back into the flock is for the shepherd to go out and look for that sheep, to find it and to carry the burden of that lost sheep upon his shoulders. And this is not an easy task for the shepherd but a laborious and

difficult one. As the rest of the flock has returned to the village with the other shepherds, this shepherd is forced to carry that one lost sheep quite a long distance all the way home.

And after that long journey, what does the shepherd do? Does he throw the sheep down, kick it, yell at it, and curse it for making him carry it all the way home on his shoulders? I might have done that. What about you?

Jesus says that the shepherd joyfully puts the sheep on his shoulders and goes home. Then when he gets home he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep!"

Here, in Jesus' parable, being found is equated with repentance and restoration to the flock of Christ. In our repentance, we identify with that lost sheep - huddled in fear and isolation, incapable of movement - at the very moment the shepherd reaches down and gently picks it up and places it onto his shoulders. And Christ, the Good Shepherd, has done the same for us! He has already taken the burden of our sins upon His shoulders and He will lovingly and joyfully carry us home to be with Him in heaven.

For you, and for your salvation, Jesus, the Lamb of God, faced that darkest hour of death alone. Alone, like that lost sheep in the wilderness, Jesus bore the burden of your sin. As He was relentlessly beaten, as His blood was spilt, as the nails pierced through His flesh, as He fought for every last breath, He willingly and lovingly rescued you from the clutches of death.

In Him, there is forgiveness. True and genuine forgiveness. And during this Holy Week, we focus on our sin - not so that we can beat ourselves up over them or come up with ways to make-up for them and gain righteousness before God - but to recognize the righteousness that Christ won for us and stand firmly in His redeeming work for our complete forgiveness and restoration.

Firmly believe, dear children of God, that by those sweet words of absolution that you heard earlier this evening, this forgiveness of sins that Christ won for you has been truly given. For when these words were proclaimed to you, it was Christ Himself who said it to you. He knows your sin and wretchedness, but He's completely cleansed you and clothed you *His* unfailing love.

As we confess our sins, we acknowledge that we are ones who need to repent. But coming to Him with this contrition in our hearts, we are also confessing faith in the One who has made us right with God. Because of Him we can boldly confess, "I am a righteous person!" In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.