

Sinners Welcome

In the name of him who came to seek and to save the lost, dear friends in Christ: The great American writer and humorist Mark Twain once quipped, "It's true that I would never join any group that would have me for a member." Implicit behind his statement is the truth that every human organization needs to have some kind of membership criteria. There have to be some standards, some expectation of its members that they meet certain qualifications and conduct themselves according to moral principles that reflect positively on the group as a whole. It's true of every organization from the Cub Scouts and 4-H to the Elks' Lodge and Rotary Club. Even criminal organizations like the Mafia and inner-city gangs have some kind of code of conduct. So what Mark Twain was saying in his own self-effacing way is that any group with standards so low as to allow him to be a member wouldn't be a group worth joining—he wouldn't want to be associated with it. That, or perhaps he meant that he wouldn't want to join a group and have to suffer the company of other people who were just as bad as him.

Either way, the remark is typical of Twain's sharp wit. I'm sure he meant it as a joke; but the fact is that we who are gathered here this morning are all part of a group that is precisely one of the kind that he said he would never want to join. I mean it's hard to imagine any organization with lower standards. For what is the Church of Jesus Christ if not a critical care hospital for the spiritually sick, a welfare shelter for the morally bankrupt, and an asylum for the sinfully insane? We confessed as much a short while ago when we all said that we are by nature sinful and unclean; and that our thoughts, words, and deeds have uniformly been sins against God. We said that we justly deserve God's wrath and divine punishment now and forever. It's something we need to remember and keep forefront in our minds: The Church is never for fine, upstanding, law-abiding citizens with noble reputations for their good works of philanthropy. It is instead a refuge for weak and wretched sinners who, trembling in fear of the coming judgment, gather to implore and to receive the mercy of Almighty God who grants it for the sake of his Son who was slain for our redemption.

We all know that. I can't imagine that anyone here would disagree ... and yet ... and yet I wonder if that's the image we project to the world around us. Is *that* the message we communicate to the people of our community – either individually in our one on one contact with others, or collectively as a congregation – that the Church of Jesus Christ, that *this* Church of Jesus Christ, is a place where sinners are welcome? That this is a place where Jesus receives repentant sinners and eats with them?

All three of today's Scripture readings underscore our gracious God's heart of compassion to reach out to and return to himself lost and erring souls. These are people who have been separated from the Lord either by their open rebellion against him, or by their having been led astray by false teachers or the empty philosophies of the world, or, as it is in most cases, by their never having had a relationship with the Lord to begin with. These latter are the victims of some recent or remote ancestor's decision to wander away from the Lord and his truth. But whoever they are, they are sinners just like ourselves who are in desperate need of God's grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. And through this morning's readings the Lord is inviting us first to see them as he does – as people he earnestly wants to gather to himself again and embrace with his love in Christ; and then secondly to consider how we ourselves can be part of helping that to happen.

And I suppose it begins with seeing how we may be standing in the way as obstacles that are preventing it from happening. Today's Old Testament lesson especially asks us to consider how we, through our words and actions, and either deliberately or inadvertently, may be preventing others from coming to faith and entering into a fulfilling relationship with the Lord. We're given the familiar biblical image of the shepherd and the sheep. And immediately before the text we heard, the Lord explains how the shepherds of Israel, that is the priests and religious teachers of the day, were falling down on their jobs. Specifically, they weren't teaching the people the Word of God. They were instead using their offices to seek honor and riches for themselves and they were oppressing the people under their care with heavy financial and even heavier legalistic burdens. The result was that God's people were being driven away from his truth and scattered so that they were easy prey for wolves. And in that section of Scripture, pastors and teachers like myself are

given a very strong warning about how we should approach our sacred callings because the Lord promises to hold us accountable for each and every lamb he has entrusted to our care. It's a thought that causes me to tremble – and to seek God's forgiveness for my many failures.

But anyway, it's in response to this that the Lord says what we heard earlier, how he himself would search for his sheep and bring them together again. He speaks of how he will be their shepherd and feed them on good pasture. And of course, this is exactly what we see going on in today's Gospel lesson, as the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is actively seeking out and saving those who have strayed. And we understand that he's continuing to do this even today through the ministry of his Church through which he calls sinners to repentance and to life and faith in him.

So far, so good; but then in the Old Testament lesson he goes on to chastise some of the sheep for their behavior. In particular he speaks of how the bigger, stronger members of the flock are hogging the feed trough, so to speak, and pushing with shoulder and horns against the weaker members of the flock. And then after they've eaten and drank their own fill, they're trampling the down green grass and muddying the stream water with their feet so that the others don't have anything decent with which to nourish themselves. Anyone who's spent time with livestock knows that this is pretty much standard animal behavior. The stronger members of the herd tend to throw their weight around. They do what they can to maintain the pecking order and keep the weaker ones in what they perceive to be their assigned place. The result is that for the weaker members, the very flock which is supposed to protect them and help them to grow is a hostile environment that actually discourages their healthy growth toward maturity.

But, of course, we aren't talking about sheep. We're talking about people who are members of the Church. And so, the question the text raises is how are we – or more personally, *how am I* – guilty of doing these things? In what ways are we who are comparatively strong in the faith making Christian discipleship and trust in Jesus more difficult, or perhaps even impossible, for others? How are we who have been blessed with the opportunity to eat and drink our fill of God's grace in Christ effectively denying it to others? Unfortunately, there are lots of potential answers to these questions:

First and most obviously, we do it when we project the impression that the Church is a place where sinners are not welcome. This is what we see the Pharisees and scribes doing in today's Gospel lesson. They are offended that Jesus is reaching out to the most notorious of public sinners. In their minds the Lord shouldn't waste his time with the likes of such people. And as easy as it is for us to criticize them for it, the simple truth is that not one of us is above displaying the same kind of haughty and judgmental spirit. The sins of pride and self-righteousness cling to us all. There's nothing we like more than cherishing the thought that deep down inside we're really pretty good people, and the fact that there are so many others around who are at least outwardly worse reinforces us in this pleasant self-deception. So, to a certain degree, we have a vested interest in keeping others in the status of notorious sinners: they make us look that much better by comparison. But we're not any better. If anything, we're worse because we *know* better. We know from what eternal peril Christ saved us when he died for our sins. And then we have the temerity to go about judging someone else's sins to be so great that they are beyond the pale of the Lord's forgiveness. It's terrible, and yet this is effectively what you're doing when you come across someone that you wouldn't think to share the Gospel with or invite to come to worship because, "he or she not the kind of person we want to be part of our group." And we could add other prejudices here as well: maybe it's not so much their sin as it is their race, accent, cultural heritage, or income level that disinclines us to welcome them into Christ's fellowship.

Another way people are discouraged from participating in the life of the Church is through intimidation and ridicule. A church can be a scary place to someone visiting it for the first time – especially for someone who doesn't know much about the Christian faith, it's all very confusing and there is so much to learn. It's pretty daunting. And they're likely to feel very self-conscious. And if then on top of it they are made to feel ignorant or foolish, and like everyone is watching them and laughing at their mistakes or lack of Bible knowledge, well, that pretty much shuts the door on them for good. How important it is that we take the time to patiently guide, assist, and teach those the Lord is calling to himself in all his ways.

I find it rather astonishing, but another way people are sometimes kept from receiving Christ's blessings is through disparagement. I mean when members of a congregation openly criticize their own church's

teachings and articles of faith. If the members don't believe it, why should anyone else? Or when members speak ill of the pastor, church leaders, or other members of the congregation—not to people within the church, mind you, to maybe help fix problems that might very well be there; but to outsiders or even visitors to the church. It's like, "Welcome to our church. Why on earth did you choose to come here?" Oh, that's real effective evangelism. And no, I'm not suggesting that we sweep problems under the carpet. I believe in dealing with them head on – but let's keep them in house where they belong.

There are many other ways that we as the flock of God can trample the nutritious green grass of his Word and muddy the crystal stream of his grace so that they aren't so readily available to others. We can do it through our laziness and neglect. We can do it through the factions and infighting that sometimes arise within congregations which drive people away. We can do it through not addressing and clearing up misconceptions when we hear them. We can do it through our hypocrisy – when people see that there's a major disconnect between what we say we believe and how we live our lives. And we can do it through fear; the fear that we may suffer rejection or ridicule for sharing our faith. What all these things have in common, though, is that by them those of us who are supposedly strong in the faith end up doing untold injury to others who are as yet Christ's weak, little lambs or would-be lambs. And through this morning's lessons the Lord Jesus calls us to recognize these sins in ourselves and repent of them.

So, let's do that. Let's acknowledge our many failures to be the kind of welcoming, nurturing, and mutually helpful flock the Lord would have us be, and confessing our guilt let's receive to ourselves his sure Word of forgiveness which is guaranteed and made tangible for us today in the body and blood he sacrificed on our behalf. And as we do, let's ask him to fill us with his own heart of compassion for the lost, that we may be his agents and ambassadors to show the world – or at least our little corner of it – that here among us the Lord Jesus truly welcomes sinners and by his blood makes them clean. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!