

“The most offensive message” Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost. Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

A fellow pastor shared with me this revealing story. As he was visiting one of his members in a hospital, he was introduced to this member’s roommate, a Hindu guy, who obviously was a very devoted follower of his religion.

He was a curious and friendly type and wanted to learn what the main teachings of Christianity were. What an opportunity! My friend gladly delivered him the message which we have received from our Triune God through His faithful servants.

That all human creatures are spiritually dead in their sins and can’t save themselves from that condition. That because of our sin we are separated from our God and there is nothing we can do to fix it. Worse, that we don’t even realize how bad our situation really is and, in fact, we don’t even care about it much.

But the Triune God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit has acted in His grace, He has come and has done everything that is needed so that we can again be reunited with Him already now, and live with Him in the age to come, when the world will be purged of all the evil, when entire creation will be restored in its goodness and when God’s chosen people will reign with Him forever.

When my friend had finished his brief summary, what do you think, what happened? What did the Hindu guy say? “What hinders me to be baptised?” No... we wish! This is what he said: “To say that I can’t do anything about my salvation, this is the most offensive message that I have ever heard!”

Are you surprised? That is because we have been insiders, so to speak, to Christian way for too long. We can't imagine how strange our message sounds to the outsiders.

You see, our God has designed and created us for a certain kind of lives. That's why He has built into us this function which constantly evaluates us – whether we live up to who we are created to be, or not.

Put it differently, all people live with this question – are we good enough? Am I good enough? We want to be good. We need to be good. We want to be acknowledged that we are good. In our own eyes and in the eyes of others.

No one can escape from this need. Of course, because we don't know our Maker and His design for our lives, we don't know what exactly makes us good. But the need to feel that we are good remains. And then we need to find ways how to satisfy it.

Some people choose religion, some people choose other pathways, like social justice movements. Those who choose difference religions, like that Hindu guy, they believe that to be good, or to be judged as good by some higher being, can be achieved if you do certain things and avoid doing others, as instructed by your religion.

That is a common theme for every religion. You do what you believe your deity considers to be the right things, the good things, and if you succeed, you will get ... whatever it is that people in that religion value the most.

But see, the same is also true for those who reject religion as such. You may have heard some of your friends or relatives saying that one doesn't need to be a Christian to do good, or one doesn't need to go to the Church to be a good person.

Even if they don't believe that some deities will hold them responsible for how they have lived, they still have the same function built into them. They still want to be good. They still need to be good. They still want to know that they are good.

They still want to feel that they have done the right things and lived good lives. This helps to understand why some can be so religiously passionate about different social justice issues, for that is their way of being good. They need it!

Unfortunately, many believe that Christianity is just one more alternative to satisfy this need to feel that we are good people. And if that is all, why would they need it? They can be good without some strangely dressed dude preaching them what to do.

And this is where this the most offensive message hits the road. This is the message that no one wants to hear, unless the Holy Spirit has already raised them from their spiritual death. The message that you cannot be good on your own.

Sure, everyone can believe that they are good enough in their own eyes or for others whose views they value. But here comes this harsh judgment from God the Creator and

the Judge of all nations: “No, you are not good enough on your own.” Worse, you are dead in your sins. Who among the self-identified “good people” would like to hear this?!

This shocking judgment is the dark background against which God’s glorious grace, His unmerited love and affection, His undeserved kindness shines so brightly – when He comes to us, not because we deserve it, not because we are quite good, or good enough... but because of what kind of God He is. Gracious and merciful.

This incredible grace of God was the reason the Pharisees and scribes were complaining about Jesus. “This fellow...” they didn’t even use His name. “This fellow, that Jesus guy, He welcomes sinners and eats with them!” Their shock makes sense.

They were the good guys. They were. They tried to keep the laws of God as they understood them, they tried to be good. They were passionate about doing the right things. As so many are today. They deserved to have been appreciated. They had merited it. But... what is this Jesus doing?!

He welcomes tax collectors and sinners! The lowest, the worst, the most corrupt and promiscuous members of their community. That ugly and immoral bunch! And He eats with them. Meaning, He accepts them... Them, not us! Of course, that was offensive.

For they just couldn’t accept the message that offended the Hindu guy. That it is only by God’s grace that we could be welcomed into relationships with the true God, and not by our feeble attempts to be good. But they felt they deserved more.

So, Jesus tells them these two parables. About the lost sheep and about the lost coin. And who are we in these parables? It would be nice to think about us as courageous and caring shepherds. But that’s not us. We are the lost sheep... and the lost coin.

You know that sheep are famous for being... smart. Of course, not! Jesus makes this clear, that on our own we can’t make it back. According to those who know this stuff, when a sheep gets lost, she panics, and she quickly loses her strengths.

Soon she can only lie on the ground and hope that someone will come and find her before she dies, or before she falls prey to some predators. The message is even more obvious with the lost coin. It cannot possibly bring itself back. No way!

Both, the lost sheep and the lost coin need to be found. We need to be found. This is where the undeserved grace of our Good Shepherd shines into our lives. He comes searching for us, going to great lengths to find us.

When He has found us, He puts us on His strong shoulders and gently carries us home. And so often we still resist, we fight against Him, we push Him away, still arguing that we are fine, we can do it on our own...

This message is offensive. You can't save yourself. But unless we first hear and accept this unpleasant truth, we won't be able to appreciate and rejoice in the flipside of this message, which we know as the Good News. The Great News.

That our prodigal God has chosen to show His unconditional grace to us, that He cares for us, His foolish lost sheep, His little lost coins, more than we know, that He values us, that He is faithful to us, that He will never abandon us.

That's Him speaking to you: "I invite you into fellowship with me. I want you to be with me, to know me as your Father, and as your brother, as your God. It is me sending my powerful Spirit to dwell in you, so that we can be one. And I will make you good, very good, I will make you holy. That is my gift to you. Just accept it. Say yes!"

Christian life is lived in tension between these two realities. Recognizing what the Scripture teaches, that on our own we are spiritually dead, and on the other hand, that we are loved and cared for beyond our comprehension by the most amazing Being.

Learning to recognize that everything we are and everything we have, we have received from our Triune God. It was your God who knit you together and formed you in your mother's womb. He breathed the breath of life in your nostrils.

He prepared this bountiful planet Earth for you. He gave you your parents. He has cared for you every second of your life. And before you were born, He sent His Son Jesus for us. He became one of us, so that He could make us to be like Him.

He has taken upon Himself all the responsibility for every wrong that we have ever done and good that we have failed to do. He has sent His messengers to the farthest corners of the world, so that only you would hear His voice, this invitation. You have heard it!

He has called you out of this world into His family, into this divine fellowship, and He still every day keeps you in this fellowship, in this one true faith. And none of this because of our goodness, but because our God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit has chosen to be good and gracious towards you.

We are not here, in Christ's Church, because this is our way of trying to be good people. We are here, surrounded by God's own family, only because the grace of God has shone on us. And as the Spirit convinces us this to be true, He renews and transforms us.

First, He takes away our arrogance and pride and helps us to become humble, especially towards those who are not here among us yet. For we recognize that we are not here because we are somehow better or more worthy than those outside the Church.

Remember, we are not here based on our merit, but only because God the Father has been gracious to us, and He also wholeheartedly wants everyone else to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Secondly, when the beauty of God's grace sinks in, it makes our hearts grateful, rejoicing in this undeserved privilege and desiring to do our best to appreciate the gift and to please the Giver. Then we don't want to be lazy or indifferent Christians.

Then we gladly strive to lead our lives in daily repentance, we strive to love our God more than anything else and to joyfully obey Him in response to everything He has done for us, fearing to displease Him or somehow to despise His undeserved grace.

Finally, once we have tasted this grace, once we know that the Lord is good, and once we know that our God desires everyone to receive and enjoy His grace, we are willing to step out of our comfort zones and to enlist ourselves as messengers of this most offensive message. For we want everyone to hear this amazing news.

For when this message is proclaimed, when we deliver it to those the Lord has placed in our lives, that is when the Spirit of life comes and raises them from their spiritual death. It happens as we speak. That is when the lost are found. That is when the dead are made alive and then there is, as Jesus said – great joy and celebration in heaven.

I pray today that the Lord would bless us, that He would grant us to witness how many are reached with this most offensive message. I pray that our God could use us to bring many into this most wonderful fellowship with Himself, where we can call Him our Father through our Brother Jesus Christ all of us united in the Spirit.

This is where our gracious God looks at each one of us with fatherly delight: "My child, you were lost, but now I have found you."

Amen.