

““Bomb” in the Church!” Luke 15:1-10

“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his 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 coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

What we believe, what we are so used to - the message that is entrusted to us - is so explosive, we could say that we have a bomb in the Church, the bomb that blows up the deepest conviction that sinful beings naturally hold true, and it hurts.

We heard today that **“the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”** How do we, Christians, usually hear this?

“O, those Pharisees and scribes, they always grumbled. They were just bad, bad apples. Tax collectors and sinners, those were good guys.” Really? Really?! According to what standards? What we as Christians believe gives us a very different outlook at everything and with time, we tend to forget how radical the Gospel message is.

“You are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, it is not our own doing.” We are so used to this formula. But let us be reminded of what the flipside of this formula is. Why should we be saved by grace alone and why cannot it be our own doing?

Because, as the Scripture tells, we are totally incapable of anything that would bring us closer to God. We are dead in our sins, no good, useless, impotent when it comes to our salvation, nothing depends on us, we are not in control, we cannot be in control, not in the slightest, our eternal fate is completely out of our hands.

That is not an easy diagnosis to swallow. Why? Because there is this universal human phenomenon. We all want to be good. Without exception. People of different beliefs, religious people, secular people. We all want to live to show that we are good.

We only differ in what criteria we pick to measure our goodness. These may be some religious standards, or secular, or even criminal standards. We all have this built-in sense of accountability, this strange voice in us, our conscience, we sense that we are and will be judged on how good we are. So, we work hard to be good.

At least in our eyes. If we have been good enough according to whatever standards we have chosen, we must receive the good things after this life, whatever people believe they are, and if someone has been a bad person, they will receive bad things.

Some set that bar very high and try very hard to be good. And the Pharisees and the scribes really tried, as hard as anyone else. They strived to live according to God's law as they understood it. They of all people surely deserved good things, now and in the age to come. That should be obvious. Jesus should know that.

The tax collectors and sinners, on the other hand... compared with the Pharisees, they didn't even try. Besides, they were real sinners, immoral people, greedy, dishonest, promiscuous, and so on. So, what was Jesus thinking as He welcomed them?!

Jesus responds to this grumbling with three parables: we read two of them. Jesus responds with this message which we are so used to, but which is so offensive to any human being who honestly strives to be a good person on their own.

Jesus gives His divine perspective on **our human condition** and reveals to us **what God's response** to our condition has been. **Human condition and divine response.**

First, our condition. Jesus compares us with sheep. It is not by accident. For sheep are those majestic, clever and accomplished creatures, the pinnacle of God's creation. Of course, not! As farmers in my previous congregation used to say: "Sheep are stupid."

If a sheep gets lost, as in this parable, out of despair it loses strength, it panics, and soon it can only lay on the ground helplessly and may die of exhaustion or fall easy prey to any predator. It cannot find a way home. It is doomed to death.

Or the lost coin. What could it do to be found? To roll out in the open so that it can be seen and found? Of course, not! But that is how Jesus describes our ability to do anything to be good in God's eyes. Lost sheep, miserable, lost coins, just lost. That is a very unpleasant verdict on our human abilities. Offensive.

What makes us lovable in God's eyes is not our condition – lost/dead in our sins, nor our abilities – we are like the sheep and the coin, stupid and incapable, nor our magnificent life achievements. What makes us precious in God's eyes is the attitude of His heart towards us, our Good Shepherd's attitude towards you.

So, what is God's response to our condition? As Jesus tells in that parable, the shepherd leaves his flock. It is not that he abandons the ninety-nine. Flocks of that size usually would have more than one shepherd. Others would lead the flock home.

But not this shepherd. After a long and tiring day, He doesn't get to go home. He goes back, retracing their steps, looking for the lost sheep. Finally, he finds it, and he rejoices. You have probably heard this parable many times. It seems so familiar.

But this is a bit of a strange moment. Sure, there is a joy of finding the lost, and we know the same to be true when the Holy Spirit brings someone new into His flock among us. Finding it was easy, but it is not the end, that is just the beginning.

It almost seems that something is missing between verses 5 and 6 in this parable. Something that Jesus skips over. **"And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. [Then fast forward...] And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me!'"**

But what happens between finding the lost sheep and coming home? In what condition does that shepherd find that lost sheep? In bad shape, exhausted, unable to move on its own. That's why he must lay it on his shoulders.

You probably have seen those nice pictures with Jesus as our Good Shepherd, holding little lamb in his arms. That is not about this parable. The sheep that Jesus was referring to in that parable would weigh 50 up to 70kg. Exhausted, dead weight.

We are talking about hill country. Walking kilometers through the hilly terrain with 50+ kg of feeling like dead weight on your shoulders. To say that it would be hard work is an understatement. Extremely hard work, requiring such a commitment.

How does our Good Shepherd find us? Perfect, holy and ready to follow Him to the Kingdom of God? No! Exactly as that lost sheep. Dead in our sins, self-centered, valuing ourselves, our preferences, our way, our pleasures more than anything.

Often He finds us in the middle of mess, that we call life, in the middle of broken relationships, broken by tragedies of this life, hurt by people who should have cared for us, in the midst of pile of foolish and costly mistakes, struggling with our secret sins, with loneliness, full of anger, bitterness, greed, envy, lust, indifference, etc.

That's us. Our Shepherd's toil doesn't stop with finding us. He can't just say: "Come, let's go home, I will lead the way!" We do not follow Jesus in our own strengths. We cannot. Till the end of our lives, till the time we reach our heavenly home, it is Jesus who carries you. He does it every day of our lives. Until he brings us to our true home.

How does Jesus do that, very practically? How does He carry us? With the help of His Body, the Church. He carries us when we listen to His life-giving words of forgiveness, be it in the Divine Service, or in Bible Classes, or in our family devotions, or spoken by our Christian friends. He feeds us with His Holy Body and Blood, restoring us, renewing us and filling us with true life, eternal life.

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He carries us by means of our fellow saints. When they provide ears to listen to our hurts, or shoulders where we can cry out our pain, or friendly hugs when we so need to feel God's love. He carries us, broken and hurt and helpless as we all are, by means of stuttering prayer and abrupt words of encouragement, when our fellow Christians do their imperfect bit to support us and care for us in the community of God's saints.

Jesus, our Shepherd employs all of this, so much effort, to carry that one lost sheep which He has found, and which He is stubbornly committed to carry home. It must be such a precious sheep to Him. That one sheep is you. And it is me. Each one of us. Jesus provides all this help to carry us safely home.

To our true home, everlasting, indescribably beautiful home, New Heavens and New Earth. That is how He carries us. He does it not because of how good and accomplished we are, nor because of how wonderful and lovable we are.

He does it because despite how miserable, selfish and sin-ridden we are on our own without His intervention, in His love and grace the Triune God wants to bring us home, to be with Him forever. That was Jesus' message.

Those Pharisees and scribes were grumbling. Sure thing! For Jesus' message is offensive, it is explosive. When it detonates, it shatters our old selves, our imaginary goodness, it levels to the ground our elevated self-image and our self-importance.

Then the Word of God rebuilds our self-understanding. Now it stands on the unshakable foundation of God's love and grace towards you. Now we see ourselves not as who we are on our own, or what we have done, or how good we have been. Now we see ourselves and others as who we are in Jesus, how good He is, what He has done and continues to do for us, and how He values us.

We are still on Jesus' shoulders. Yes, we are. We need Him to carry us. Day in and day out. And He will. He will never drop you; He will never leave you behind because it is just too difficult to carry you.

He will bring you home and then there will be great rejoicing. Great rejoicing in heaven! And then, finally, you will see your Shepherd Jesus face-to-face, and you will be able to thank Him for everything.

For you were lost, now you are found and He carries you home. He does.

Amen.