

Trinity 3 Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

By the Right Reverend Michael W. Hawkins

Bishop of Saskatchewan

This man receives sinners and eats with them. +

I often think that this sentence should be written above every altar: “This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them.” That is the Gospel Word, and that is the Gospel sacrament. That is the good news for you and me today.

Many things changed in the church at the time of Reformation, and while the restoration of the language of the service, and of the cup to the laity, were some of the most striking changes in worship, the place of general confession and penitence by Priest and Laity has been an equally important part of our heritage.

You should note that our Prayer Book requires the Priest to kneel with the People at two key stages in the service. First, at

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the Confession, on page 77, where it says at the top, in the rubrics or red italics, “both Priest and People humbly kneeling”, and second, at the Prayer of Humble Access, on page 83, where it likewise directs the Priest to kneel and humbly say the Prayer with all that shall receive the Communion.

These are two essential community-making moments, for we recognize not just a common humanity, but a common sinfulness and need for grace. The Priest kneels with the People, and this was new at the Reformation, for there is no distinction, for all have sinned. This is a community-making moment, or rather the moment when we are open to God making us a community in Christ. I highlight the place of the General confession and the Prayer of Humble Access, not just because they are a treasure of our tradition, but because they teach us in liturgy the lessons of our readings today.

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The simple lesson of our readings today is this: “God giveth grace to the humble and there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.” That is the very lesson which we learn and experience again and again in our Reformed Liturgy. What follows our penitent Confession, but our joining in the joyful song of the angels? That is a profound liturgical expression of this: there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.

What follows the Prayer of Humble Access, but the grace of the Communion? We learn there again and again, God giveth grace to the humble.

Ask me why I am an Anglican and I just might say, Trinity III and the Communion Service of the Book of Common Prayer, and for the happy truth set forth there. There is joy in the

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presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth and God giveth grace to the humble.

Our readings today speak to us of God and the Proud and the Humble, in our Epistle, and God and the Self-Righteous and the Penitent, in our Gospel. There is bad news for the Proud and Self-Righteous. God opposes the proud, and the self-righteous find no joy. Is that not so often true? Self-righteousness is miserable misery. St. Peter tells us to clothe ourselves in humility. But instead, I fear we are full of pride and self-assertion. And so God opposes us, and the devil has a feast as we bite and devour one another.

St. Peter speaks of the two-fold nature of Christian humility. It is to be humble under the mighty hand of God, and humble toward one another. And this is not some rarefied virtue which God requires only of the especially holy. “Clothe

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yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for

‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that

in due time he may exalt you.” It is pride which overestimates

the wrongs we suffer and underestimates the ones we commit. It

is pride which in its impenitence is full of murmuring self-

righteousness. Beware of murmuring, for by it that whole

generation died in the wilderness, without entering the Promised

Land. Jude refers to the proud, “These are grumblers,

malcontents, following their own passions, loud-mouthed

boasters, flattering people to gain advantage.” In other words,

beware of whining. I think that our Anglican Eucharists can

sometimes be exactly that, whining and dining.

This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them, and so we

insist that none come here to be received by Christ, and to eat

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with him at this table, unless they be a sinner. We would prefer notorious sinners, but we let in lesser-known ones as well.

For we know that we belong either to the respectable, proud and self-righteous - the miserable murmurers - or to the sinners, the lost, the scandalous, who have nothing to boast about, nothing to trust, but the love and mercy of God.

The people in today's Gospel are offended that Jesus would associate and eat with sinners, and Jesus answers them that not only will he receive them and eat with them, but that he deliberately seeks them out! Jesus' response and these two parables either offend or comfort. They offend the proud and self-righteous, and they comfort the penitent and humble. The comfortable words in our Holy Communion service, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners", are also offensive

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words. It all depends upon who you are, and how you think of yourself and of others.

Yet, there is good news in those readings, for God gives grace to the humble and joy to the penitent. Our Gospel is about the Joy of repentance. In response to the self-righteous objections of the religious people, Jesus told three parables, of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. All three parables are about the joy of repentance, of sins forgiven.

We are told today that God cares for us. The Pharisees take exception to that care being extended to sinners. They are scandalized by Jesus associating with sinners” He responds by teaching them that not only does God in Christ receive sinners, he goes out of his way to find them.

The lost sheep is outside of the fold and can only get itself into more danger and trouble. The lost sheep is outside. But the

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lost coin is inside, not as much in danger, but of no use until it is found. Some of us are lost sheep, outside the Church. And some of us are lost coins. We are in the Church but not found, not fully useful in her service.

Now the lost sheep cannot find its way back, it can only get more lost. I am reminded of a gem my children brought home many years ago. They informed me that if you get lost in the woods, you are to hug a tree. The idea is, I presume, that all a child's attempts at finding their own way out, will only make it more difficult for the rescuers to find them. But there is a profound spiritual wisdom there. Only once we have given up trying to find and save ourselves, can Christ find us and save us. There is a profound wisdom there. When you're lost, hug a tree, and that tree is the cross of Jesus Christ, the tree where the lost are found.

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In Holy Communion, the story of that Gospel is played out again. In Communion, sinners draw near to hear Jesus. There he receives them and there he eats with them. There he communicates his saving love to them and for them. There we eat and make merry, for the dead are alive and the lost are found through Jesus Christ our Lord. There is room for everyone, except for those who would murmur, who would not repent themselves and would deny others the opportunity. God resists the proud. He rejects them, and they will not eat at the banquet of his grace, love and joy. But he gives grace to the humble, he receives sinners and eats with them. He knows what you have done, and he forgives you, he knows where you are and he has come for you.

The humble receive the grace of God, and the penitent rejoice. The good news of this day is a scandal to the world, and

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it is the Gospel of Salvation to those who repent and believe that Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. Amen and Thanks be to God!