

Sermon for the Third Sunday after Trinity | 2026
By Fr. Hayden A. Butler

The Gospel Lesson this morning builds on the logic of last week's Gospel Lesson, including our Lord's parable of the kingly feast. As we will remember, the king provided for a banquet and invited guests who found other occupations and deferred the offer. In their stead, the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind, those wandering the highways and the hedges were brought into the feast to enjoy it, receiving it as the gift it was and not as one option among many. This morning, the Pharisees murmur against such generosity as they witness our Lord eating with tax collectors and sinners, those whose moral status in the eyes of the authorities disqualified them from table fellowship with pious people, and especially a purported rabbi.

The moral anxiety of the Scribes and Pharisees stems from an interpretation of the parts of the holiness code of the Torah that concerned improper intermingling, of 'mixing of things that don't belong together.' An example of this arises in Leviticus 19, in which the Lord God declares, "You shall keep My statutes. You shall not let your livestock breed with another kind. You shall not sow your field with mixed seed. Nor shall a garment of mixed linen and wool come upon you." The purpose of such commands was to reflect the holiness to which the covenant people were called, a way of reminding them that the purpose for their calling was absolute, not admitting of compromise. Our Lord ratifies this sense of calling in His own teaching during the Sermon on the Mount, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." While their zeal for the Torah was undeniable, the Scribes and Pharisees erred in the application, seeing *that* kind of people as too compromised to belong to the holy people of God, whose fellowship could only corrupt what was pure. Of course, this was a specious argument, since the Pharisees and Scribes did not actually believe that Jesus was the Christ, but rather used this moral anxiety in an attempt to discredit Him.

In His response, however, Christ reveals their misperception by offering two metaphors to show that the status of 'lost' and 'found' do not alter what a thing is. That a sheep wanders does not make it less of a sheep. And a wandering sheep is of great concern to a good shepherd, whose job it is to make sure the whole flock gets where they need to go. In fact, a shepherd exists precisely for the moment when a sheep strays. So it is with the coin. Though it is lost, a coin does not lose its value and so must be sought out and found. As our Lord teaches elsewhere, a coin is stamped with an image, and that image marks the coin with belonging, revealing the authority that guarantees the value of the currency so long as that authority endures. Both metaphors demonstrate that a lost sheep or coin does not cease to be what it is, and so the proper response to what is lost is to find it and return it to the group to which it belongs. The Scribes and Pharisees are in error because they have drawn a line to separate what, in fact, belongs together. They have divided what God is uniting.

The Scribes and Pharisees misapprehend what holiness is. Holiness is not a fragile attribute that can be nullified through proximity to wickedness. In the Scriptural sense, holiness means uncompromised devotion to a calling expressed in loyal love through trials. Human holiness is a borrowed holiness, a function of unbroken communion, the effect of receiving the whole gift that God makes of Himself to us and making an unreserved gift of ourselves to Him in turn. In His corrective teaching, our Lord reveals that holiness does not become unholiness because of proximity to sin. It is always rather our complicity with those things that defile and captivate us. This is evident in our Lord's own temptation, who was enticed relentlessly by the actual devil and who preserved His innocence through testing. And as He later taught His disciples regarding their moral anxiety over unclean food: "Hear and understand: Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man...But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man."

The greater problem of confusing holiness with moral anxiety, however, is that it causes us to forsake the fellowship to which we belong and must attain. Holiness is the quality of a life of undiminished purpose in communion, a life of graces and gifts. Moral anxiety is an attempt at a managed life, a life we can control through scrupulosity, shame, and ever more alienating purity tests. Unavoidably, that way will lead to disintegration and exile until no two people are left together. But that is not the life meant for us. Our call to be a holy people means fixing our eyes on the Lord and remaining with Him through faithfulness in prayer in this life, and face to face in His presence in the next. All the graces of God are moving in this direction. In a tragic irony, by writing off the tax collectors and sinners as a lost cause, the Scribes and Pharisees actually separate themselves from the Lord who comes to seek and save. By exiling what God is bringing together, they have exiled themselves.

This morning, we have been drawn from many places and many other ways of life to be partakers of Christ's life in His Body, the Church, as members with one another. We live an interdependent life with those who, at one time or another, may have or still seem like our enemies. But Christ opens His table fellowship to us all once again in the Eucharist, inviting all to share this holy meal of bread and wine with Him, but insisting that we grow closer together as we do. Do not worry about your worthiness, for we are all the living evidence that our Lord faithfully seeks and saves what was lost. I heard it once said that if the Lord waited only to eat with the perfect, He would always be eating alone. Again today, He ushers us to sit with Him and feast with the saints of heaven in a fellowship of life given and life received. Draw near with faith, for our Lord is not willing to eat alone. Lift up your hearts once again. For as Jesus said: "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."