

Hanover International Worship

June 20, 2021

Sermon on Luke 15:1-3.8-10

Pastor Viola Chrzanowski

Grace be to you and peace from God our father
and the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

What is a Pharisee? Well, I am sure you all have
your ideas about that.

We Northern Germans for instance tend to think
of a large mug of strong coffee with a good shot
of rum in it, topped off by a crown of whipped
cream. Now why is that? Some of you may know
the story behind it.

The villagers of a North Frisian parish liked their
rum, and they liked it at every festivity. Now of
course they all knew their pastor did not approve

of this practice, so they came up with the idea of
hiding the rum in a cup of good strong coffee. To
disguise the smell of the alcohol, they would top it
off with some whipped cream. The pastor, of
course, would get his coffee without rum. Now it
came as it must, someone got the cups mixed
up. The pastor tasted his coffee and yelled "You
Pharisees!"

So this is the way the name of this North Frisian
beverage is supposed to have come about.

And it is also an excellent depiction of how the
term "Pharisee" has become a synonym to
"hypocrite" in common usage.

Pharisees – that's always the others. Those.
Over there.

O.k., here we've got them now, the Pharisees,
nicely pigeonholed, and we can leave them in
their drawer.

But who were the Pharisees really?

The Pharisees that Jesus met were, first and foremost, people who were trying hard to lead a life according to God's will.

There were theologians among them, scribes who knew their way about in the holy scriptures, but mostly these were just ordinary people. Jesus sat and ate with them frequently, as Luke tells us. He may even have been regarded as one of them.

In their attempts to give God all honor, the Pharisees were intent on keeping the cultic laws, the rules of a kosher life, as they were prescribed by the scriptures and their interpreters. Which meant that they kept away from all uncleanness, especially from people who were considered to be unclean.

This concept of cultic purity may seem weird to us today. On the other hand, hasn't Covid introduced a certain concept of purity into our society and our lives during the past year? We

keep our distance from other people, hygiene has a priority it never had before.

But even without Covid, there have always been people we like to keep our distance from. And usually, we can't even pretend that our reason for doing so is as honorable as the reason the Pharisees had, the sincere wish to live according to God's will.

I am not even talking about obvious minorities or about people who are marginalized by society, like refugees or drug addicts or people who have served their sentence. Those, or some of those fall into the scope of our acts of charity and welfare once in a while at least.

But just look around yourself, in your own environment, in your school, in your work environment, in your peer groups: There is an outsider in every one of those groups. Someone who just doesn't belong. Someone who behaves a bit differently from the others. Someone who is

a bit weird maybe. Someone who has failed in a moral sense maybe. Someone who gets ignored or looked down upon whenever he or she opens their mouth.

Well, so why don't these outsiders just make more of an effort to live according to our rules? Adapt to our culture, stop behaving weirdly, live by our code of conduct... in short: be more like us? Then we could integrate them so much more easily, right?

There's nothing wrong with getting people to change their lives. To put it in theological terms, changing your ways and getting back on track is what repentance is all about. The Pharisees knew about that. They knew about the possibility of getting back on track for someone who had gotten lost.

So what is the difference between Jesus and the Pharisees? Asking people to change their lives

can't be it. That's all over the place in Jesus' teachings.

Jesus addresses the Pharisees, he speaks to them directly. And before we start thinking about what he tells them, let's make a short note of what he doesn't tell them:

He does not criticize their attempts to live their lives according to God's will. He does not even question their righteousness. He does not break off his fellowship with them.

Instead, he tells them a parable.

A woman loses one of her ten coins. There has been a lot of speculation about what these coins are about, if maybe they were part of her dowry, or an inheritance. It seems certain that they had great value to her. One theory is that the coin mentioned in the story was worth a day's wages. So, for a poor woman living on her own definitely a reason for a thorough search.

She lights a lamp in her small house, hoping to see the gleam of metal somewhere. And when that doesn't help, she gets out her broom and sweeps the whole house, to be sure she didn't miss any dark corner.

Finally, she discovers the coin. What a great joy! The woman is so overjoyed she can't keep this joy to herself. She needs to share it with others. She calls her neighbors and friends and invites them to celebrate with her and share her joy.

Jesus adds the interpretation of this parable right away: This woman rejoices over the coin she had lost and found again. In the same way, God rejoices over a person who had been lost and is found again.

Isn't it surprising what images Jesus uses? The shepherd who carries the lost sheep home in his strong arms, well, that's a familiar image. We have seen it on pictures in a million churches, and it's all there in the Old Testament already.

But a woman as an image for God... that is outrageous. Women did not even have any legal position back then. This being a poor one even, the lost coin making a real difference to her.

To this woman, a single coin is so valuable that it is worth any trouble of searching. To God, Jesus implies, a single person is so valuable that he or she is worth any trouble of searching. The lost one, the loser, the one who is not worth anything in the eyes of those around him. The one who has infringed on moral values, the one who has lost God, the one who has gotten lost before God.

O.k., so when this sinner now had found his way back... well, no, we can't really say that because the sinner is not the one who is searching! GOD is the one who is searching!

O.k., so let's start this sentence over again: When this sinner has been found again, God's joy is so great he can't keep it to himself. It is so

great that he wants to share it with us and with the Pharisees.

This is what Jesus is telling us with his parable. There is no need for the Pharisees to be anxiously striving for ritual purity. There is no need for them to be concerned when they see Jesus communing with those who are impure.

We are not made pure by keeping away from the impure. We are made pure by communion with Jesus. In the Pharisees' thinking, the impurity is what's contagious. In Jesus' thinking, it's the purity that's contagious. We are not made impure by having communion with those who are impure. We are made pure by having communion with Jesus.

We don't need to be anxiously concerned about our identity and our image before others, fearing that it might get damaged by being seen with outsiders or by having communion with those who are less respected.

God invites them and us into his community. That is how we get our value and our purity. God gives it to us.

The distinguishing mark of this community is joy. That's what Jesus wants us and the Pharisees to learn: to share in the joy of God's joy over everyone who is in communion with him.

O.k., so we are supposed to share in God's joy. How does that work now? Is it some kind of a feeling of happiness? Or maybe a constant "keep smiling"? Like the cliché we Germans tend to have about Americans, that they have this insincere smile on their faces at all times?

You may remember the word of the German philosopher Nietzsche who said "If I was to believe in the God of the Christians, the Christians would need to look more redeemed." He missed the joy in our faces, and maybe rightly so!

This joy is an attitude that pervades our whole lives. And what place would be more appropriate to celebrate this joy than in our worship! Let's get rid of our grumpy faces and share in God's joy.

I remember a service in a very small church in the United States that we visited on vacation maybe forty years ago. The pastor, a little elderly man, was going to honor a few women who had done something to serve the congregation, I don't remember what it was. He asked them to come up to the front, gave them all a hug and a jelly roll.

Now I am not proposing that pastors should go around hugging everyone. It's something this pastor could do in all innocence forty years ago. Times have changed.

But what stuck in my mind is what this pastor said to the surprised visitors: Christians shouldn't be walking around with a face like they had sour pickles for breakfast.

On a side note, by a sheer coincidence (if there is such a thing), we revisited that very church on our last trip to the United States two years ago. On the cemetery next to the church we found the grave of this pastor. He actually went by the nickname of "the little pastor" because he was so short, and the tombstone told the story of his "jelly roll ministry" which gave joy to many.

The Pharisees had to learn this from Jesus: Join in with God's joy over those who have not been part of our community before! Share God's joy like the neighbors share the joy of the woman who has found her coin.

Let's learn with the Pharisees and join in with God's joy. No, I am not suggesting that we all have coffee and rum after service today. But let's not stick with the sour pickles either. Let's share God's joy and join in with it!

Amen.