



A WRETCH LIKE ME...?

September 11, 2016, The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 15: 1-10

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Theme: We're all "wretches" – sometimes, in some way.

Eternal God, beyond time and space yet as close to us as our own breath, be present to us in our here and now. Speak to us through the ancient words of Scripture. Open your word to us once again this morning so that timeless truth may find us in our time. May it nail us, O God – comforting us if we be afflicted, afflicting us if we be too comfortable. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Every other year I get invited to preach at the wonderful little summer chapel up in Watch Hill Rhode Island. A few Brick families hang out in that lovely place over the summer months, so there's just a bit of pressure, but I really do like doing it.

Some years ago, the Watch Hill Chapel assembled and printed their own Prayer Book and put it in the pews. It was nicely done, though studiously traditional. Most of it was actually cribbed from the old Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, which is not a bad thing.

Among the prayers they borrowed is a well-known and eloquently pithy prayer of confession. We sometimes use the Presbyterian version here at Brick. It begins, "*Almighty and most merciful God, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep...*" (Those lost sheep are a direct reference to the Gospel reading we just heard). The prayer continues, "*We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.*" ("Devices and desires" – such perfect language, so perfect that P. D. James used the phrase to title one of her murder mysteries.)



So far so good, but two phrases that come later in the original prayer cause a lot of folks to swallow hard when they get to them. The prayer continues, “...we have done those things which we ought not to have done,” and then the first phrase that causes hard swallowing “and there is no health in us.” *NO health? I mean, NO health at all!* And a line later, it reads, “Have mercy upon us...” then the second swallow-hard phrase “have mercy upon us, miserable offenders.” *Miserable offenders?!* I mean, I may not be perfect, but “miserable offender... with no health in me?”

Anyway, in the version they printed in the Watch Hill Prayer Book, the editors put both those phrases, “miserable offenders,” “no health in us” in parentheses. I guess the idea was that when you got to “no health” and “miserable offender,” you could just skip over if you thought it all a bit much. “I mean, I may not be perfect, but really...”

Exactly the same thing has happened with an awkward word in the first verse of the hymn we just sang, *Amazing Grace*, which is probably the most popular hymn in the English-speaking world. “*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.*” *Wretch!?* I mean, I may not be perfect, but *wretch!?* “Wretch” is so off-putting that some hymnals and popular renditions substitute another word, usually “soul.” “*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saves a soul like me.*” Way nicer, right?

In the Gospel passage for the day that Kent just read, Jesus talks about 99 sheep safely in the fold and the single errant one, the shepherd finally rejoicing over the lost one found. Jesus next tells of a woman with a purse full of coins who loses one and scours the house till she finds it, again rejoicing that the lost has been found. Jesus sums up the two parables by saying, “*Just so, I tell you that there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*”

Now, it’s really important that just before Jesus tells these parables, Luke pointedly tells us *to whom* he told them. And *whom* they were told to makes all the difference. He told these two parables to a cluster of ultra-pious Pharisees and straight-arrow scribes, the supposed moral superstars of the day. Luke notes that



these perfectly virtuous types had been grumbling about the fact that Jesus had the nerve to socialize with the likes of “tax-collectors and sinners,” the Mafiosi and low-life’s of the day.

So... when you first hear these two parables, you’re tempted to think that the good Pharisees and the decent scribes stand for the 99 sheep that are not lost or the nine coins safely in the purse. You’re tempted to think that the single errant sheep and that misplaced coin must stand for all those wayward tax collectors and nasty sinners.

But not so fast; there’s more going on here. Remember that these same Pharisees we want to cast as the sheep in the fold and the coins that never got lost are *the very Pharisees Jesus calls “whitewashed tombs”* – people shiny clean on the outside and dead rotten on the inside.

They doubtless *thought* they were the 99 unlost sheep and the coins in the purse, but Jesus has got the Pharisees’ number. He’s not saying anything as simple as “you Pharisees are the 99 sheep in the fold and the nine coins in the purse and the tax-collectors and sinners are that lost sheep and errant coin.” The deeper, edgier truth in both these parables goes more like this: *Everybody* – Pharisees, scribes, tax-collectors, sinners, everybody – you, me, all of us, are a little lost, at least some of the time. All of us – Pharisee, scribe, tax collector and sinner alike – all of us are in need of some finding once and again. We’re all of us in need of repentance, that turning toward God, that turning toward becoming the person God calls us to be. Sometimes there really is “*no health in us,*” all of us, not just them. Sometimes we really do act like “*miserable offenders,*” every one of us, not just them. Some of the time, like it or not, all of us, not just them, really are “*wretches.*” The world is simply not neatly divided between the virtuous on one side of some line and the sinners on the other, the good guys and the bad guys, the honest and the crooked. It’s way more complicated because we’re way more complicated.

C. S. Lewis, Oxbridge academic, novelist and Christian apologist, is probably the most widely read theologian of the last half century. Lewis was a good man and a



quirky guy. He once wrote this. *“To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.”* “The inexcusable” in *me*, please note, not in *them*.

I heard a poem in a sermon a few summers back. I asked the preacher for a copy. She didn't write it; it was anonymous and she thought it was a bit cheesy. I agreed, but wanted a copy anyway. Cheesy poetry can sometimes go to the heart of the matter. You've heard of “died and went to heaven” jokes. This is a “died and went to heaven” poem.

*“I was shocked, confused and bewildered
As I entered heaven's door,
Not by the beauty of it all,
Nor the lights of its décor.*

*But it was the folks in heaven
Who made me sputter and gasp –
The thieves, the liars, the sinners,
The alcoholics and the trash....*

*I nudged Jesus, ‘What's the deal?
I would love to hear your take.
How'd all these sinners get up here?
God must've made a mistake.
And why's everyone so quiet,
So somber – give me a clue?’*

*‘Hush, child,’ He said, ‘They're all in shock.
No one thought they'd be seeing you.’”*

So sometimes Christians do edit prayers and hymns to smooth over the sharp edges. Sometimes churches do the same with worship services. A preacher friend of mine told me about a church-growth conference he signed up for. At the first session, they said that if you want to grow your church, you should not announce



deaths of congregation members at the beginning of the service. And moreover, some church-growth gurus also say that you should eliminate prayers of confession from the service. All that stuff about death and sin, mortality, my shortcomings and failures... it's a real downer. You should start the service with uppers. In fact, it should be *all* uppers. Well, we started this service with both death and a prayer of confession. We owned up to our human brokenness; we said it out loud to God and in the presence of one another.

But here's the gospel – understood rightly confession is not a downer at all. To confess, to repent is actually and oddly the beginning of the good news. It's good news because it's the cleansing and needful starting point, not the ending point. Sin in us is real; it needs to be acknowledged, but it's not where we end up. Our prayer of confession was and always is followed by forgiveness. And of course, there can be no forgiveness without confession.

We'll end this service with the ordination and installation of men and women to church office. That act is a daring affirmation, it's an affirmation of all the good that these men and women can and will do for the church as leaders, all the good that they can and will do for the glory of God. Here's the good news point – they can and will do it in spite of the fact that every one of them, like every one of us, has once and again been a “miserable offender,” sometimes maybe even a “wretch,” occasionally perhaps, one with “no health” in them. What we will do at the end of this service is a bold testimony to what grace of God can and does do in the lives of imperfect people like you and like me.

But remember – you only get there when you have the moral courage to examine your life, every corner of it, candidly and scrupulously. You only get there when you own up to the shady corners of who you are and place them in the blinding light of God's love, week after week, asking for grace so that you just might grow, an inch a day, closer to the person you were created to be.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.