

What Is One Sinner Worth?

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Luke 15: 1-10

Delivered on September 15, 2019

Art Linkletter famously said that kids say the darnedest things. Everyone knows that who has been a parent of kids, or who remembers being a kid themselves. But not only do kids say the darnedest things, they also think the darnedest things. Now let me tell you what I mean. You see, when I was a kid, I can remember being taught by my first grade teacher, Mrs. Taylor that a picture is worth a thousand words. You have heard that before, haven't you? "A picture is worth a thousand words." Now, from what I remember of her, which admittedly isn't much, Ms. Taylor was a good teacher. But to tell a classroom full of first graders that a picture is worth a thousand words was to tell them something that was a little over our heads, or at least my head. I didn't understand what she meant. Now of course Ms. Taylor meant that if you take a picture any picture, and you have someone who doesn't see the picture, then that person needs to have it described with lots of words before they can see it with their mind's eye. But that's not what I thought she meant. I understood Ms. Taylor to mean that if your friend had a picture and you had a collection of a thousand and one words, any thousand and one words, then you would have something that was worth more than what your friend had.

I tell you this story this morning because when I was a kid, if I had heard this gospel lesson, I probably would have thought something similar to what I thought when I heard this phrase about a picture and a thousand words. In our story today, Jesus is caught by the Pharisees and the scribes, the religious people of his day, eating with tax collectors and sinners. Now I think we may need some explanation of what we mean by tax collectors and sinners. By tax collectors we don't just mean IRS agents. You may not care for IRS agents, but tax collectors in

Jesus' time were people who collected funds for the Roman government. They were looked down upon because they were considered traitors, those who were disloyal to God's people and working for an occupying enemy force. And by sinners, we don't just mean people like you and I in the sense that all of us are sinners. We mean unrepentant sinners. The bad people of society. The drug dealers, the prostitutes, the pimps, the terrorists, you name it. And we are told that as they see Jesus doing this, the Pharisees and the scribes grumble saying "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them". And as the text says they grumble, I think we can almost hear them saying this under their breath. But Jesus hears them, or if he doesn't hear them he knows what they are saying because he then proceeds to explain what he is doing by telling them a story about a shepherd and a lost sheep and a woman and a lost coin, and along the way he says to them there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine righteous people who need no repentance, there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over the ninety nine who need no repentance. Now, what does Jesus mean? Well when I was a kid, I'll tell you what I would have thought he meant. I would have thought Jesus meant that when you have a hundred righteous people, then you have just as much joy in heaven as you do over one sinner who repents, but if you have only ninety nine, well then, there is more joy in heaven over that one sinner.

But of course Jesus means no such thing. And yet I have titled today's sermon "What Is One Sinner Worth?" I have put today's sermon in the form of a question because I am not sure any of us could say what Jesus means when he makes this statement. We may know that he doesn't mean that one sinner is equal to exactly 100 righteous people any more than one picture is

equal to a thousand words. But just what does he mean? What does he mean in this business about sinners and righteous people?

You have probably heard this a hundred times before, but I think it is a sign of our moral decay as a society that the good people of our society, those who are helping society, that is, do not get very much respect and those who are harming society do. My wife is a teacher and I can tell you from first-hand experience that teachers do not get enough respect. Not only are they underpaid, but what teacher hasn't encountered a parent who blames the teacher for their child's poor grades or their poor conduct? Sometimes they'll even blame the teacher in the presence of the child. I can also tell you from first-hand experience that members of the clergy do not get very much respect. Now I don't have any complaints at all about how I am treated by all of you. I sincerely appreciate how you all treat me. I don't just mean that there are some bad churches out there who abuse their pastors and treat them terribly, although that is true, such places do exist. But I was recently talking with a member of this church and reflecting on the fact that in the past twenty years every time I've turned on the television and see a movie and there is some fictional story that involves a member of the clergy, that member of the clergy will almost always be a sexual predator or they'll be an embezzler or they'll be some deranged cult leader. These people exist. They do exist, but we're not all bad people. The vast majority of us are good decent and honorable people who are doing the best we can to show God's love to the world. Now, I am not asking you to feel sorry for people in my profession or my wife's profession, I just happen to know more about our professions than other professions. But I also have no doubt that people in other professions who do nothing but try to make the world a better place are also treated with a lack of appreciation and respect. So if you want to tell me

that you know first-hand that nurses don't get enough respect, or firefighters or police officers, I take you at your word.

The good people of our society do not get enough appreciation and respect, and don't even get me started on the people our society have decided to honor and respect in their place, the so-called role models like musicians and celebrities. I don't even want to talk about them. So why is there more rejoicing in heaven over the bad people who repent than the good people who've been good all along? Haven't the bad people of our society had enough people cheering for them already? Haven't they Jesus?

I wonder, when you were growing up, going through grade school and middle school and maybe even high school if you ever had some kid that was persecuting you in some way. Maybe they were harassing you or trying to pick a fight with you or maybe they didn't have to try, maybe they succeeded in picking a fight with you. And so when you finally couldn't take it anymore you went home and you reluctantly told your mom and dad. Well, if your mom was anything like mine, she said to pray for them. Now, dad never said that, did he? Dad was always watching John Wayne movies and so he always said, you need to teach that kid a lesson or something really macho like that. But mom would say to pray for them. And you wanted to say, mom, what? Pray for them? If you want to pray for somebody why don't you pray for me? I'm the one getting bullied here. Why would I pray for them?

Well, mom prayed for you, too. But she said to pray for the bully because she knew that if someone could not find any joy in life without pushing someone else around then they probably felt pushed around themselves, and if they couldn't find any joy in life without making you into a victim then they probably felt like a victim themselves. And the bigger lesson here is

that if you see someone who is lost spiritually, they are probably well aware of just how lost they are. They are probably well aware. Well, now it's coming into focus, isn't it? Now we can see why Jesus says there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than 99 righteous people who need no repentance. And don't get me wrong. Yes, of course if you have ever been a victim, if you have ever been beaten or robbed, or mugged or betrayed or harassed, or bullied or kidnapped, of course you need prayer, too. No one can deny that. I'm sure it's not something you would ever want to happen to you again. But as hard as it may be to accept, anyone who would do that to you is hurting even more than you. And that is why, that is why when even one such person anywhere in the world gets down on their knees and tells God they are tired of running, and they are ready to come home, all the angels in heaven throw a party. They sing and dance and throw one of those loud parties until the neighbors call the cops.

One of my favorite films of all time is Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, a suspense-thriller that came out in the mid-1950s. In this movie, a man played by Jimmy Stewart is cooped up in his New York apartment all summer because he has broken his leg and he sits all day in a wheelchair with a cast running the entire length of his leg. So with nothing to do all summer, out of nothing but sheer boredom, he decides to start spying on his neighbors. So he takes a pair of binoculars and starts peering into the windows of his neighbors whose apartments are across a courtyard. And as he does that, he comes to see that one of his neighbors, a man named Thornwall, has a lot of strange things going on. His wife who is an invalid suddenly disappears from the apartment one day, never to be seen again. Thornwall has movers come to the apartment and pick up a trunk that he's tied up with heavy rope. He takes several trips in and out of the apartment in the middle of the night. Another neighbor's dog starts digging in

Thornwall's flower garden in the courtyard and he shoos him away as if he has something hidden in there that he doesn't want the dog to find. All of this leads Jimmy Stewart to believe Thornwall has killed his wife. But Jimmy Stewart's detective friend tells him he thinks there's an innocent explanation for all of this. "That's a secret private world you're peering into over there" he says. "And people do a lot of things in private that they couldn't possibly explain in public."

I don't think I have to tell anyone here, that each of us carry on a secret private world within ourselves and we let other people see only as if through a window. But the picture of our lives that we let others see in glimpses through that window is never the full story; it is never the complete picture of who we are. No matter what you may show the world, maybe in your own life you are running away from God. Maybe in that life that only you know about you have turned your back on God, and you are in pain. If that is you, why not give the angels in heaven something to party about. Why not give them something to rejoice about? Come home, come home; come home!