

A Spiritual Breakthrough! | Luke 15:1-10; 1Tim 1:12-17 | LUMC | 9-11-2022 **By rev Grace Kanake**

Dear church family and friends: in the last three weeks, St Luke covered the extensive work of Christ. Jesus walked through the fields, knocked on office doors, attended functions, went to the places of worship, went into prisons, was in the marketplace and on the roadsides casting seeds of grace to the people who listened to him. Some people followed him, attending in-house or open-air events. Through these weeks we heard Jesus loud and clear promoting an inclusive life, asking us to invite unpleasant people into our lives and live a Christ-centered life despite any opposition to it.

Jesus was often incensed by those bound up since childhood in their negative cultural teachings, a culture that neglected the poor, paid little attention to children and minimized women, *but* promoted male figures. A cultural group that promoted “holier than thou” tendencies clothed with religious sentiments. The cultural, religious and social/political systems created laws that oppressed others.

Despite these barriers to a viable ministry, for two years Jesus was lenient with those who promoted these harmful beliefs and laws. But, toward his third year of ministry, Jesus “took off the gloves” and began to rebuke his followers. He asked them to choose: to obey him and stop the self-centered life or, continue to promote a culture that hurt foreign as well as local people. Jesus called his followers to see the other side of the coin and not “bury their heads in the sand” like an ostrich, nor to live a life of pretense. Jesus wanted Christians then—and now—to hold each other accountable. Those followers previously living a double life took a stand to be counted with Jesus and live a practical, genuine faith.

In chapter 15 St Luke introduces us to Jesus accompanying sinners, a special point of emphasis. After challenging his followers to live faithfully, there was a breakthrough. Sinners were attracted to Jesus; they came in droves ready to repent.

Jesus was likewise attracted to sinners. He would visit their places of work and eat with them in their homes. Jesus identified with sinners, yet cautioned them against leading double lives. This practice of openly being with sinners led to Jesus’ first charge for blasphemy: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” The Pharisees, and the Scribes had not found any fault in Jesus’ message until then. They just called him a blasphemer¹. The mere accusation did not stop Jesus from associating with sinners, because he came into the world to save the sinners.

Jesus confirmed that God celebrates when a sinner gets saved. God is known for hosting the great celebrations for those who turn away from following their own desires and decide to be with God through Christ. God hence invites everyone to celebrate. We learn from St Paul that the people with dug-in sins see nothing to celebrate. In fact, they feel mocked, disrespected, dishonored and humiliated. They do not feel it’s their celebration time.

¹ A blasphemer is someone who insults or lack reverence for God, despises religious doctrines and dogma and religious writings.

Sinners instead will devise plans for revenge. They will despise their so-called “enemies”, and align with the law and populace that favor their plans. They may call for mob justice against those thought to have strayed away from their evil acts: thieves and arrogant, proud, and self-seeking lifestyles. Saul, who Jesus saved and changed his name to Paul, was just such a schemer against the saved Christians.

We have so many people who behave like Saul in the world today.

Can you comprehend what the Pharisees and the Scribes were doing here? They finally accomplished their first charge: Jesus was blaspheming God by mixing and eating with the social and moral lepers. For example, the Pharisees hated the tax collectors because they worked for the Roman government. They drained people of their money, paid the Roman government its proper share, and pocketed the rest. Zacchaeus was a tax collector. When Zacchaeus had a spiritual breakthrough, he repented being avowedly sinful, and promised to return twice what he stole to the owners.

Imagine Jesus being accused of reforming evildoers like Zacchaeus and healing the lepers isolated by the Jewish religion and culture. This accusation did not bother Jesus as he continued to reform society, blessing those saved with wisdom and great survival skills. He declared those healed to be clean, although he rarely asked them to go pay the temple fee for cleansing so they could rejoin society.

God is pleased with those admitting their sinfulness, repenting and promising to live a Christ-centered life. The repentant person indeed lives a Christ-centered life in comparison with the sinners or deniers who are proud in their sinful and wretched lives.

Going forward, Jesus defined his role as the shepherd of the lost, contrasting himself from the proud Pharisees who would load on others what they themselves would not carry! Shepherds occupied the lower sector of the Jewish social life. They languished most of their time in fields grazing their flocks and encountering wild animals preying on their flocks. On the other hand, the Pharisees and the Scribes had fancy offices and lived in flashy homes built with the sweat of the poor.

Jesus came to occupy a lowly position so that he could identify with the down-trodden. Jesus viewed the Pharisees and Scribes as those lost, the “99 in the bush”. Jesus’ goal was to rescue the lost despite the shame he bore, the rejection, the suffering, the threat of death, and ultimately his actual death. Despite these challenges Jesus worked hard to save the sinners from every sector of life. Jairus, who Jesus saved, was a Roman leader, and Nicodemus was himself a Pharisee.

Jesus encouraged the lost sinner to be “found”, to enjoy the intimacy and comfortable privileges that others did not know. The saved people were being held in high esteem, carried on shoulders high and given places of honor. The repentant sinner enjoys life and enters into a close relationship with God. Jesus encourages us to seek out sinners and lead them into a new relationship with God, and with themselves and others. The joy of having a newly saved person among us becomes a celebration for eternity.

A spiritual breakthrough heralds physical, emotional, psychological, and mental changes. We read in the Bible of repentant people who resigned their jobs to follow Jesus. Most of his disciples were fishermen. Jesus called them to “fish for people”. Another dreadful sinner, Zacchaeus, repented and followed Jesus. Perhaps he left his public work of tax collection. St Paul left his cultural teaching career. Dr Luke, a physician left his medical practice to attend to St Paul as a personal secretary. Aquila and Priscilla left their silk business to be missionaries.

A spiritual breakthrough can affect the saved emotionally. We see people postponing their lunch to listen to Jesus for many hours. We encounter people’s brokenness (change of heart/attitude) toward God, toward themselves, and toward others. One of these people was Jonah, who preached at Nineveh and the whole city repented. Another person was Zacchaeus who affirmed that he would support the poor and repay what he had overcharged and in effect, stolen.

Jesus compels Christians to live a Christ-centered life because on our own, we cannot understand, experience, or even relate with God, ourselves and others while in an unbelieving state. We are blindfolded by evil thoughts that cross our mind even in the middle of a sermon or prayers. I will never forget my Christian friend who opened her eyes in an evening fellowship. She says, “During prayer I opened my eyes. I saw the person leading the prayer being very ugly appearing, like an animal. I had never had a close look at this person before. I was afraid, I closed my eyes quickly, but the action scared me the whole evening.”

We are finite and our finiteness can become a barrier to faithful living. Our breakthrough comes when we live for Christ, agreeing with Paul, “It is not me who lives but Christ lives in me”. Being in the Spirit we can overcome our cultural, negative beliefs ingrained in us since childhood. Being in Spirit we can love our neighbors, friends and family members. Being in Christ we can play on a level ground and accord everyone a voice, despite our societal standing, age or gender, local or foreign. We become one family of Christ born of Spirit and the water of baptism.

We can emulate St Paul for his awareness of a previous evil life. He confessed to being a murderer, a violent person, a persecutor of the early Christians, a proud, orthodox Jew, a promoter of Jewishness with a non-compromising evil-bent spirit. St Paul defined his new life in Christ differently. He became who he was by God’s mercy. God forgave his unbelief and made him a new creature because Christ came into the world to save sinners. I know God felt mercy on me and revived my soul by his grace. I have lived my life by grace of God. I have come this far by God’s mercies! Jesus came into the world to get you and me to a better place.

When we encounter the Holy, we can proudly stand with Jesus like the man born blind whose blindness he healed. The blind man testified and bravely stood with Jesus when Jesus was being accused of healing him and leading him to repentance on a wrong day and in a wrong place?²

² John 9:1-41, a good read to identify with what Christ does in our lives. Amen!

This Jesus who led the ancient people to repentance, a spiritual breakthrough, is the same Jesus saving us today and forever. We are called to stand on Christ's shoulders, relying on his truth as we make our way through the current culture of lies. Let's be confident and strong in trusting Christ despite how friends and family may think of you and me. Jesus is our rock of ages, our visible, and only God. May we honor Jesus for saving us and including us in God's glorious life forever.

Amen.