

Luke 7:18-28

It's becoming more and more common for those in the public eye, when passing out holiday greetings, to say in the same breath, "Merry Christmas and Happy Hanukah!" Town squares across our country which used to display nativity scenes at Christmastime, have been ordered to keep such scenes in the storage closet because Jews and Muslims are offended by them. President Obama declared that the White House Christmas tree this year will not display any Christian symbols. In a land which is supposedly a Christian nation, it is becoming more and more apparent that "toleration" and not Christianity is America's true religion

But even 2,000 years ago it was a crime to be intolerant. John the Baptist was not tolerant of Herod's public wickedness. He had been enjoying his brother's wife, and John told him that sex outside of marriage is a sin. And so John was thrown into prison. The "Voice" was silenced. The greatest of all the Old Testament prophets was sitting in a dungeon. And Herod enjoyed visiting him there. Like a lion behind bars in a zoo, it was entertaining for Herod to listen to John. Out in the wild deserts Herod was afraid of that lion. But now that John was behind bars, Herod enjoyed his visits with him.

Herod lives in all of us to a certain extent. We do not like it when God's Law hunts us down and accuses us of wrongdoing. We much prefer for the Law to be locked up behind bars. And that's where we put God's Law when we filter out the things we don't want to hear. When the voice of John calls us to repent of our wickedness, how often don't we respond, "Oh, I'm not so wicked. Others are much worse than me." How often don't we turn God's Ten Commandments into the Ten Suggestions? "After all, I know what's best for me...better than some ancient rules."

The Law of God is not so frightening when it's behind bars. Behind bars the lion cannot get to us and cut us open exposing our wretched, guilty heart. And so most people in the world do not mind at all sitting there with Herod listening to John in his prison cell. And as a result, they never get to Christ. Because the lion is not able to tear them up, they never go and seek out the Great Physician for healing and forgiveness.

But John was never about himself. He always pointed to Christ. Even in prison John pointed to Christ. Our text tells us that John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask Him a very important question: "Are You the Coming One, or shall we look for someone else?" Now do we really think that the prophet John was unsure about who Jesus was? Or quite possibly, John knew that it was time for his followers to leave the petting zoo and start following Jesus. And so he sent them to Christ with this searching question: "Are you the Coming One?"

Where are you at in your life? Are you still in the zoo with the Law behind bars, or do you hunger and thirst for Jesus' words and so you are regularly found where Christ is given? Have you tamed the Law of God and made it a pet so that you are no longer frightened when it roars? so that you think nothing of its condemnations? so that you're quite comfortable when hearing the Law, and you never say of yourself: "I am a miserable sinner...I deserve hell as punishment...I need my Savior's words of life and forgiveness." John sent his disciples to Jesus. They needed to start following Christ, not John anymore; and so do we. They needed what only Jesus could give them; and so do we.

When John's disciples arrived, Jesus gave this answer to their question: "What do you hear and see? The blind receive sight, the lame walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." This is not the work of the devil, but the work of God. In creation there were no blind, or lame, or deaf, or lepers in God's perfect world. But sin entered and

turned God's perfect world upside down. Satan flipped God's applecart over and the apples went everywhere.

Jesus came to turn creation right-side up again. He came to put all the apples back into the applecart. And so Jesus gave sight to a blind man...an apple was put back into the cart. He made a deaf man well...another apple back in the cart. He healed a leper...one more apple. He raised a dead person to life...another apple. Everywhere Jesus went He was restoring God's creation--performing miracle after miracle, forgiving the woman caught in adultery, receiving sinful little Zaccheus--all of them apples put back into the cart.

Even today those apples are being put back into the cart. Through eye doctors, glasses, and contacts, God restores sight to those with poor vision. Through medicine, doctors, and nurses, God heals those who are sick. Through hearing aids many are able to hear. Through surgeries, those with bad knees can walk. Through heart medicines and bypass surgeries, new life is given to many who would have died. But especially this--through the preaching of the good news, you are given eternal life in Christ.

Maybe everything in your life seems to be turned upside down. December can be a difficult month for many with its busy schedules, its drain on the checking account; the emptiness when all gather together as families and because of a death, a spot is now vacant at the table. Even though, in Christ, our world is right-side up again, we who are Christians can feel as though things are not right. We can have days of despair and frustration. At times it can look as though all the apples which were back in the cart are scattered everywhere once again.

Take a look around you. What do you hear and see? The Christmas tree with its Christian symbols and all the decorations in the church are not here for their beauty. They declare the truth that your Savior has been born. The cross proclaims that He died for you. The Sacraments tell you that He lives to be with you in these holy things for you. The words of Christ declare that you are forgiven of all wickedness. No matter how many apples are still scattered in your life, your sins are all atoned for. Every one Jesus forgives.

Hanukah does not have it. Christmas without Christ does not proclaim it. But God's Word tells it like it is--Satan's evil plan has been defeated. God's mercy is greater than your sinfulness. Christ is the answer to all the troubles in your life. The Law may condemn you, but what do you hear and see? In Jesus you see a Savior whose blood was shed for you. In Him you hear words that give you life forever.

The White House can place what they want on their tree, but here Christ is King. Here Christ is not just on our tree, He is in water, bread and wine. He is in your life and in your heart. And He who has set all things right for you by His death and resurrection will, day after day, continue to put the apples back into your cart through His life-giving words. Amen.