

## 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time - C

Why would tax collectors and sinners all come near to listen to Jesus?

Surely, they knew that he would require them to change their ways.

God does not condone sinful behavior. God is a God of righteousness, and so, as tax collectors and sinners approached him, they had to know that things had to change.

I think the biggest difference between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees, who also demanded that tax collectors and sinners give up those ways that did not correspond with God's will, is that Jesus offered hope, while the scribes and Pharisees only offered the Law—and, in fact, the Law as they interpreted it.

Embedded in Jesus' message of conversion was the promise of a forgiving and merciful God, a God who not only gives the sinner a second chance, but actively seeks him/her out.

The scribes and Pharisees had a more "take it or leave it" approach. Either abide by their teachings or be put outside the community. Not much openness to reconciliation there.

For the scribes and Pharisees the attitude seems like it would have been okay with coming home 99 sheep instead of a hundred. 99% -- that's an acceptable return, right?

But Jesus provides an image of God who is not content with "most" of the sheep, or "nearly all" of them. God wants the whole flock—whole and entire, down to the very last one—to be included in the community of the saved.

Jesus was not soft on sin, but neither did he allow himself to be deterred by it. Any one in need of forgiveness could draw near to him and not be disappointed.

I think it's worth thinking a moment about the sins involved in today's readings.

The Israelites quite clearly were uncomfortable with a God they cannot imagine—one which seems to be beyond their grasp.

They opted for something a bit more familiar and borrowed a god from the neighboring cultures.

Paul admits he was "a blasphemer and a persecutor and arrogant."

The younger son takes his inheritance and goes and there can be no mistaking that in doing so, he basically saying to his father, "You are as good as dead to me."

These are all portrayals of sins against God himself, and it's those very sins that God forgives.

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Many people can admit to the small transgressions – too much gossip, overeating or other forms of self-indulgence, lording it over others, wasting too much time.

What stops people cold, though, in many cases is when they end up doing something that they can never forgive themselves of.

They confess it again and again because it just does not compute to them that God could be that forgiving.

They certainly aren't.

That's why we need to listen so closely to today's readings. They assure us that there is no sin that is larger than God's capability, God's willingness to forgive.

This is a challenge for us to believe in our own case, and a challenge to put into practice in the case of others.

We can get to the point where God's desire that all be made one no longer applies; it loses its force as a guiding principle and we settle for taking the easy steps and leaving the hard ones alone.

We all probably can think of a situation in which reconciliation with another person seems too hard, and so we don't work at it. We may no longer even entertain the notion.

Readings like those of today can rekindle hope in us, if nothing else. We have the impression that the son who left took a long time before he "came to his senses" and returned to the father.

But the Father hoped all along. He never gave up.

God hopes for our reconciliation. He never gives up on it. He actively seeks it out.

Maybe the only thing we can do today is to rekindle our own hope and refuse to settle for something less than a full restoration even if it's long in coming.

Even that will show us to be children of the one who does not rest until the entire flock has been restored to oneness.