

Luke 15:1-10
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 11, 2022

"A man is known by the company he keeps." You may have heard that saying. It actually is the moral of a fable by the ancient author Aesop, the point of a story about a man checking out a donkey he was considering purchasing. He took it home but didn't load it with a burden or hook it up to a cart. He sent it out in the field with other donkeys and observed what it did. After it headed for the laziest critter and biggest eater, he knew he did not want to buy the animal and quickly returned it. He could see its character, thus the moral of the story.

There is a truth to be learned as the crowd we hang around with can exert peer pressure and lead us into bad behavior. Many a parent has warned a child about choosing the right friends. But sometimes we need to refrain from snap judgments and dig deeper into a situation. That was the case with the critics of Jesus in today's Gospel reading. We consider the statement made,

THIS MAN WELCOMES SINNERS

- I. Be glad he does
- II. Do the same
- III. Rejoice together

Be glad when you hear about Jesus that this man welcomes sinners. That attitude was not the intent of the words when spoken. They came from the lips of Pharisees. That group of Jewish people emphasized obeying God's law, at least in the way they defined it. They swelled with pride because they felt themselves well-versed in knowledge of God's law and successful in keeping it. Surely the Lord must be pleased with them. However, they acted with hypocrisy, often keeping it only in an external way and skirting what God really sought. When Jesus came along, he exposed their false front. That didn't stop them. Instead of evaluating and changing their ways, they opposed him.

Teachers of the law, professional students of the Old Testament and those who copied the manuscripts, joined forces with them. There are some in every crowd, such as fashion police or the politically correct. They may start with a motive of upholding standards but get carried away.

These individuals whom we meet viewed tax collectors and other sinners in a negative way. The tax men were usually dishonest, strong-armed and cheating their neighbors to line their own pockets with wealth. Plus they were helping the Roman government, whose rule was resented. As a result tax collectors were shunned in society. Their testimony was not allowed in court and their gifts of

charity were not accepted. They were lumped with the "sinners". Everybody is one of those but not all admit it. The group so labeled would include the dregs of society: bums, drunks, drug addicts, prostitutes, traitors and criminals come to mind. In the extreme view of the Pharisees it could take in anybody not part of their group. No others were good enough for those who thought so highly of themselves.

The reasoning of Jesus' opponents in criticizing him was that if he's really God as he claimed to be, he certainly would never associate with such individuals. They were beneath him and he wouldn't want to soil himself by close contact. Their teachings stated, "Let not a man associate with the wicked, not even to bring him to the law." The Messiah was coming into the world for good people like them. "This man receives sinners" was not intended as a compliment. But it was true. He attracted them like a magnet. They hung on his words. They recognized their problems and felt their need but had been trapped in their bad behavior. Here was one who offered hope and help.

"This man welcomes sinners" is music to our ears. We are sinners all. We come here with a burden of guilt accumulated daily. Oh, you and I may not be viewed so badly by society or by our own ego. We try to be upright and honest. We show up for work on time and earn our wages. I don't cheat on my spouse; I've stayed out of jail; I pay my bills on time. Look at how good I am—I volunteer at church and in the community. My kids behave, at least most of the time. Or if older, they turned out pretty good, didn't they? There is the spirit of the Pharisees lurking in each of us.

Then we hear the voice of God's law: hatred is murder in God's eyes, feeling lust is committing adultery. Or we think of the opportunities we have missed when we could have helped someone in need. We recall the words muttered under our breath, the jealousy our hearts have harbored, or our neglect of God and his Word.

God knows it, too. Jesus did something about it. He sought us straying sheep. Effort and risk were part of the search. The shepherd in that first parable had to deal with swamps and thickets; with poisonous plants and predatory animals. He could have decided it was not worth it. "One sheep—that's not much. Only 1% of the flock. I'll just write off the loss." Not Jesus, our loving Good Shepherd. He held back nothing. He died for you and me. He endured more than words of criticism. He suffered the just anger of his Father over the sins of the world. His were the pains of hell while on the cross. He paid the price and broke the bondage of sin. Then he rose from the dead. That miraculous act shows we are freed from sin's curse. He guided your life to reach your soul with the good news. Maybe it was the blessing of being born into a Christian family who brought you to the

Savior already as a baby in baptism. It could have been a neighbor who shared the message of the Savior and invited you to church to hear more. Or that special someone to whom you were attracted and who became your spouse influenced you and brought you to know Jesus. Whatever the route needed to reach you, the Spirit planted faith in your heart and you know the sweet forgiveness God grants. Be glad that "this man welcomes sinners."

II.

That good news not only impresses us. It transforms us. When you hear about God's seeking love for the lost, adopt the mindset of your heavenly Father. Do the same. We realize the importance of finding the lost, for we have experienced the shepherd's tender care. We would not have found the way back to the fold on our own. In fact, we would not have even tried but would have kept wandering deeper into sin. When the shepherd in Jesus' parable found his lost sheep he carried it home on his shoulders. It was weak and weary by then. As it rested secure on the shepherd's shoulders the sheep didn't look around with smugness, bragging, "Look at me. See where I am riding!" So when found by our Lord we do not boast but are thankful and realize there are more lost ones. We want them to have the same comfort, security and joy.

Thus we will seek others. Some who are lost have never known the Savior. We will bring them the gospel. Tell what the Savior did for you and what he means to you. That good news will be used by the Spirit to convert souls to faith. We witness and we support mission work to seek those lost souls.

Others who are lost once knew the Savior but strayed. Their eyes caught sight of other desires, sinful pleasures that allured and then snagged them. They had misplaced priorities that crowded God out of their lives. They took the Word of God for granted and neglected hearing it and growing in faith. They became lost. We don't shrug, "You made your bed. Now lie in it." No, we care about them. We will speak to the family member who has followed a sinful lifestyle. We do so not with an air of superiority, looking down on the person, but with genuine concern for the welfare of their soul. How many members of your confirmation class are still connected with the church? Many may have moved away, but if you still have contact, remind them of the value of what Jesus offers. There could be a negative response: "It's none of your business!" We will persist in reaching out, investing time and effort in seeking the lost. We have concern for their souls. Sometimes the concern calls for actions of tough love. The situation that prompted today's Second Lesson involved a man who had been living in an improper relationship with his father's wife. In his first letter Paul had urged the Corinthian congregation to deal with the situation and they had excommunicated the individual to alert him to the danger the situation posed to his soul. The process worked. The man repented. A lost sheep (or coin) had been found, to use imagery

of the text. Paul instructed the congregation to welcome the man back with forgiveness so he did not despair. No waiting period or added penalties.

People who have lost pets will search diligently, put up signs and post messages on social media. Those efforts are for an animal. We are dealing with human souls and eternity. Will we not labor tirelessly? We are not producing the change. That is the work of God's Spirit through the means of grace. But we have the privilege of bringing the message that the Spirit employs.

There is urgency to the work. The time is limited. This date, September 11, lives in the memories of many of us because of the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City twenty-one years ago. It was a horrible event and has changed much about our lives to this day. Did you ever wonder how many of those who perished were not Christians? We must be active and diligent in seeking the lost and straying, for we do not know how much time either we or they have.

III.

When we reach out to sinners and the Spirit produces repentance and faith, we then can rejoice together like the finders in the two parables before us. The shepherd and the woman both invited their friends and neighbors to celebrate their finding of lost items with a party. "Really?" we might wonder. I have been happy to locate misplaced items, but that's a bit extreme. That's how our God is. He is extreme: extreme in his loving care, extreme in his work to save us, extreme in seeking the lost. Each individual is important to him. You are important to the Lord. When God celebrates, the angels in heaven join him. The party will last eternally.

So let's join the celebration. Thank God that he found you. Express your gratitude in worship and praise. Show it as you serve and obey him. Live each day to his glory.

Join the celebration for others whom he has found. Rejoice when a sinner repents. Join in fellowship with other found sinners. Speak no putdowns or make them feel beneath you because of their history. Don't extend the welcome in a demeaning way, "Haven't seen you in ages. How long has it been?" Recognize that all of us are equally in need of God's amazing grace. Some who are won may have come from a much different background or had a sordid past or even have wronged you personally. It doesn't matter. Care about and seek the lost. Share God's forgiveness with the penitent. Praise the Savior as we worship together and serve him as an army going forth not with force to punish and subject victims but in love to seek and win hearts for Jesus and heaven.

"This man welcomes sinners." Could there be any better words to describe Jesus? Be glad he does, do the same and let's rejoice together now and forever.