

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The text for our consideration is the Gospel lesson from Luke 15.

Dear brothers and sisters through faith in Christ:

9.27.15
Rev. Peter Kelm

Those people. Why is Jesus hanging out with those people?

That's what the Pharisees and teachers of the Law are wondering in our text. Why is Jesus hanging out with those people. And it's not like this is the first time. In fact, during his three years of ministry, Jesus was constantly hanging out with those people.

Tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers. Cripples. The blind, the deaf, the mute. Lepers. Gentiles. Sinners. The kind of people that no self-respecting Jewish Rabbi should acknowledge, let alone talk with and hang out with. In fact, Jesus didn't just hang out with those people, listen to them, talk with them, eat with them...he even called them to follow him and be his disciples. He called Matthew, the one who wrote the Gospel, straight from the tax collector's booth. He reached out and touched unclean lepers, he hung out with tax collectors at dinner parties and allowed a known adulteress to anoint him with oil.

Those people. Why is Jesus hanging out with those people? In response to their mumbling and grumbling, Jesus tells the Pharisees and tax collectors a story. Actually he tells them 3 stories: the parable of the Lost Sheep, The Parable of the Lost Coin, and the Parable of the Lost (or Prodigal Son). Let me tell you a story about one of the ministries that you support through the South Wisconsin District.

Pastor Afam Ikanih is one of the missionary pastors in our District. Originally from Nigeria, Afam has been in this country for a couple decades. He was ordained as a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod Pastor a few years ago. But Pastor Ikanih doesn't have a typical congregation. In fact, he invited me last year to preach to his congregation. On the day before Easter. But before you can get to the people of his congregation, you have to go through a metal detector. And there was no beautiful sanctuary, with stained glass windows, church pews or organ. Only a drab gymnasium, with three colors on the walls: dark grey, medium gray, light gray. And only about 50 plastic chairs set up in front of a small podium. And as the worshippers wandered in, they were all wearing the same clothes – orange jumpsuits. The service was at the House of Correction in Franklin. And after I preached, Pastor Afam Ikanih, the District's chaplain at the House of Correction - brought forward a group of 13 men for baptism. There was no beautiful ornate baptismal font. Just a plastic bowl with tap water set on a plastic chair. But that didn't matter, because the Word of God was there, and the Holy Spirit worked through that Word and water to wash sins away.

The last man to get baptized that day was a tall, thin quiet African American man. I later learned from Pastor Ikanih this man's story. He had recently had a child in his family die. And as you can imagine, dealing with that kind of grief without having a chance to be there for your family must have been horribly difficult. Well, one of the prison guards encouraged this man to go and talk to Chaplain

Ikanih. The man refused. Several more times the guard encouraged him. Again and again he refused until finally he said, I'm a Muslim why would I go talk to a Christian chaplain? But finally he relented and talked to Pastor Ikanih. And then talked to him again and again, and he began to see the freedom that comes from the Gospel, the forgiveness of sins, and life everlasting. And so he asked to go through Baptism classes. And the smile on that man's face when he was baptized is a smile I hope I never forget.

The Pharisees and teachers of the Law in our text looked at the people that Jesus was hanging out with and saw, "those people." Sinners. You see, in their world it was us and them. And "those people," those "sinners" just didn't measure up. But Jesus sees people differently. He sees sinners, too – we're all sinners - but Jesus sees sinners who need to be brought to repentance. He sees people who need to be valued. He sees human beings who desperately need love. He sees souls that will spend an eternity somewhere. When Jesus sees sinners, he sees Lost Sheep that need rescue. And with Jesus, it's not just about what he thinks or feels, it's about what He does. And we all know what Jesus did. It's one thing to be nice to sinners....it's another thing altogether to willingly suffer and die for those sinners that they might have forgiveness and eternal life. The Shepherd didn't just search for the Lost Sheep. The Shepherd laid down his life for the Lost Sheep.

And I gotta be very honest here. I think a lot of us look at people like those Pharisees and teachers of the Law. We see those people. Those people with the lousy morals. Those people who've made a mess of their lives. Those people who don't get it. They don't know how to behave, they don't know what to believe, they don't understand anything. We watch the news and we read the paper and we surf the net and we scroll on Facebook and we see "those people." And inherent in that kind of a worldview is somehow thinking that those people are different than me, different than us. And once we start to see people that way, we've forgotten who we are.

It's not us and them. It's just us – sinners. We're all sinners. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." It doesn't matter if our sin is respectable upper middle class Lutheran sin or urban ghetto sin. Sin is sin. Which is why we so desperately need Jesus. To bring us to repentance, to wash us off, to rescue us, to bring us back to the rest of the flock.

And because Jesus cares about sinners, we care about sinners. And it doesn't matter whether those sinners look like us or not.

Pastor John Reinke and Pastor Bud Palmer minister to the deaf. And deaf people struggle in so many ways in our culture, because of their lack of hearing they are isolated, misunderstood, lonely. In fact, they are one of the most unchurched of all groups of people in our country. But Jesus loves them. Because they need him. Thanks for supporting the ministry of Pastors Reinke and Palmer.

This congregation has been a great supporter of our Karenni ministry. Immigrants, refugees...to many people those are just stories on tv. But for you, you know their names and their faces, and you care about their souls and how their children are learning and growing in this country. It isn't those people...it's brothers and sisters in Christ.

Likewise, we have a number of African immigrants here in the Milwaukee area. Some of you may know Pastor Kasongo Gui Kabeo from the Congo, an LCMS pastor who has a congregation of other African immigrants. He's now reaching out to African immigrants up in Appleton and Green Bay. Thank you for your support of his ministry.

There are so many other stories to tell. In fact, I know that some of you have been involved with and have supported the SOS Center on 46th and North for many years. Tyrone Dumas, leads a team of dedicated volunteers who provide tutoring, and a Christ-centered environment for kids in the city who need a place like SOS...a safe place to learn and to grow in their studies and in their understanding of a Savior who cares about sinners.

Thank you for your support of all these ministries and many more through the South Wisconsin District. But the question for you personally and for your congregation continues to be simply this: who are the "those people" that God has placed in your life, in your neighborhood, in your community. People that may or may not look like you, or talk like you, or have the same background.

We all have some Pharisee in us. We all wonder from time to time about those people. We look at the sinful world around us and can become pretty arrogant...in fact, we start to see Lost people as the enemy. We start to see them as the problem.

But the problem is sin. And there is only one solution for sin.

Doesn't matter if it's upper middle class sin or urban ghetto sin. Rural sin, white sin, black sin. Lutheran sin. Muslim sin. The problem is sin. And it's a problem that infects all of us. From conception. You're a sinner, and your parents were sinners. I'm a sinner and every preacher whose ever been up here has been a sinner.

Which is why we go back to this story and look at what the Shepherd does. Goes after the Lost sheep. Rescues the Lost Sheep. But more than that, lays down His life for the Lost sheep. Takes the punishment for the sin of the Lost sheep. Suffers and dies for the Lost Sheep.

700 years before Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, the prophet Isaiah under inspiration of the Holy Spirit penned these words: We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way, and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

Thank you Jesus for rescuing Lost Sheep. Thank you Jesus for rescuing me. Help me Jesus to reach out to the Lost, wherever they might be. Amen.