

+ Luke 15:1-10 + Jesus Welcomes Sinners + 17th Sunday after Pentecost + 20 September 2015 +

When was the last time that you were welcomed? It might not have involved much hoopla. Perhaps it was simply on a little sign in a flower bed outside a friend's house or a professionally made sign outside of a business. Maybe it was expressed in a handshake or a hug when you arrived at a loved one's home or when you came to church or when you met up with friends.

"Welcome" is a word we usually love to hear and experience. For example, think of the joy that soldiers feel when they return from a long deployment and the words "Welcome Home!" are emblazoned on banners and posters held up by their loved ones. While you may not have had that experience, being welcomed does give you a sense of joy and acceptance.

It should be no surprise, then, that the same thing happens when we welcome others. When you welcome someone, you express how much that person means to you as a loved one, a friend, a fellow believer, even a customer. Out of love or hospitality or kindness, we often spare no effort to give a warm welcome.

Yet when it comes to sharing the good news of Jesus, do you always welcome everyone? It's much easier to share Jesus with someone you know or love or who is like you, but if it's someone you don't like or don't know or isn't like you, sharing Jesus can seem much harder. Usually if you can avoid it, you do. Yet how quickly we forget that even though God had every right to avoid you and me, **JESUS still WELCOMES SINNERS!**

We find Jesus on his final trip to Jerusalem. There he planned to celebrate the Passover festival one last time. He would end that ancient celebration of the Lord's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery by delivering humanity from sin's slavery. As Jesus traveled, large crowds traveled with him. The crowds included many could be described as "outcasts" of society. Among them were tax collectors—loyal servants of the hated Roman Empire who often scammed people to line their own pockets, and also those described as "sinners," people who were often considered the "scum" of society.

You could tell where people fit in society by how close they were to Jesus. Besides his disciples, the religious elite hung close to Jesus to hear his every word, while the tax collectors and "sinners" lingered out at the crowd's edge. Yet no matter who they were, everyone wanted to hear Jesus teach.

It's no surprise that what Jesus had to say hit home most powerfully not with the nearby elite, but with those out on the fringe. This good news of full forgiveness and spiritual freedom and eternal life pulled those out on the edge of the crowd to get as close to Jesus as possible. The Holy Spirit was working through the good news Jesus proclaimed and was creating faith in their hearts. That faith, then, was drawing them literally closer to the Savior.

As the tax collectors and "sinners" crowded closer and closer to Jesus, some of the religious elite called the Pharisees started to mutter to each other, "Can you believe what he's doing? It's awful! How could any righteous Jew even consider doing such a terrible thing? ***This man welcomes sinners and even eats with them!***" The Pharisees prided themselves on their self-made purity and looked down on those who weren't as "holy." The way Jesus drew the outcast and the "sinners" to himself was revolting. If only those Pharisees realized what they were saying! They were really expressing the heart of the Gospel. **Jesus welcomes sinners!**

As true God, Jesus knew what they were muttering. So he told a story to illustrate what those who quietly mocked him needed to hear. A shepherd was out tending his large flock of 100 sheep. He had spent weeks, even months, with them. He knew every sheep by name. He knew the personality of every weak lamb, foolish ewe, and stubborn ram.

Then he discovered that one sheep had disappeared from his flock in search of green tufts of grass. He was devastated! Without a second thought, the shepherd immediately left the 99 out in the pasture to go looking for that one lost sheep. He searched high and low, refusing to stop until he found his sheep. Why so much effort for a foolish animal who cared more about grass than his shepherd? That sheep was precious to him.

Eventually the shepherd found his sheep—famished, dehydrated, and weak, but safe. He didn't scold or beat the sheep for its foolishness, but instead "***joyfully put it on his shoulders and went home.***" Why rejoice so much over a lost sheep? The shepherd had 99 others. Why bother? That sheep had done nothing, but made his day more difficult, but the shepherd cared so much for that sheep that he carried it home on his shoulders.

Even then, the shepherd's joy didn't stop! "***He called his friends and neighbors together and said, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep!'***" This man celebrated over the discovery of a foolish animal—and that

was Jesus' point. How much greater is the celebration in heaven when the Savior rescues one sinner from the fires of hell!

Jesus told another story. A poor woman was counting the very little money she had—ten silver coins or about ten days' wages. When she pulled one coin out of her tattered bag, it fell to the floor and rolled off into the shadows. When the woman realized it was lost, she began sweeping. She lit a lamp and swept every inch of her dirt floor, searching carefully on hands and knees until she found the coin and returned it to its proper place.

“When she found it, she called her friends and neighbors together and said, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’” Why so much effort and so much joy? That woman had no one to support her, so every one of those ten coins was precious. Every coin represented food on her table, clothes on her back, oil in her lamp. So that widow rejoiced over a coin. Again Jesus made his point. The angels in heaven rejoice when one sinner is saved through the sharing of the good news of Christ.

Every sinner is precious to the Savior. Jesus never shunned a “sinner.” He didn’t shun sinful infants, when he took them into his arms to bless them with his forgiveness, or the physically ill, who needed the assurance of forgiveness before they needed healing, or even those self-righteous Pharisees, who needed the full rebuke of God’s Law and the full healing of God’s Gospel to transform their hearts—as he did with the Apostle Paul.

Paul once persecuted Christians thinking he was doing God a favor when he was actually attacking his Savior. God could’ve destroyed Paul, but instead he poured out his mercy making Paul one of the greatest proclaimers of Jesus Christ. Even Paul’s soul was precious to Jesus. ***“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.”*** (1 Timothy 1:15-16)

Jesus considers your sinful soul precious too. So often we’re like those Pharisees forgetting that Jesus welcomes sinners. Maybe you feel shocked when you see the Lord work in hearts you don’t expect. You get caught up in your own righteousness and what you’re doing for God rather than what he’s done for you. You forget how Jesus considered your soul too precious to abandon. Yet when you stare into the awful mirror of God’s holy Law and see how far your disgusting self-righteousness takes you from your loving Shepherd, all you can do is cry out like Paul, “I am the worst of sinners!” All of us deserve destruction and death for our foolish wandering, but Jesus does not punish us as our sins deserve. Our souls are precious to him too!

Remember where Jesus was headed as he told those stories! He was on the road to suffering and death. He would soon put himself in the place of all “sinners”—young and old, big and little, rich and poor, wise and foolish, you and me. Like a lamb to be slaughtered, Jesus went to sacrifice himself because he considered your sin-ridden soul too precious to abandon—not because you deserve such sacrifice, but because Jesus loves you so much.

Like the shepherd and the woman, Jesus spared no effort to find you. You were so hopelessly lost it took everything on his part to rescue you. His love for you compelled him. He had to leave the comforts of heaven to search through this corrupt world. He had to face the roadblocks and dangers of temptation. He fearlessly slogged through the muck and filth of this world to find souls. That search even took him to the darkest ends of society.

Finally that search led Jesus to a barren hilltop where he endured the worst, most difficult part of the search. There he sacrificed everything to rescue lost sheep like you and me, but when he stepped out of the tomb alive on Easter, Jesus proclaimed to the world that his search was successful!

Now the Lord comes to you through simple means, lovingly picks you up, and places you on his forgiving shoulders. He graciously reveals his loving heart and his full forgiveness in his Word. There you read over and over again of the amazing mercy and love, forgiveness and grace of your Good Shepherd...and how he found you when you sought him not.

Through simple water connected with his almighty Word in Holy Baptism, Jesus made you a beloved member of his flock. There he connected you to his life, death and resurrection. There his Holy Spirit created faith in your heart and made you a child of God. The Lord now refreshes your soul as he gives you his body and blood in bread and wine to forgive you, to strengthen you, and to assure you that you have been saved. Jesus spared no effort to find you and now spares no effort to keep you in his care.

Because Jesus spares no effort, we spare no effort to find the lost and bring them the rescuing news of the Savior. We spare no effort to share the Savior with people so he can take those lost sheep on his gracious and almighty shoulders. We spare no effort to reach those who may differ from us in personality or gender or race or social status or family background. We spare no effort to take that good news of Christ's love for sinners to those who need it most, no matter who they are. We spare no effort to welcome them warmly with open arms because Jesus spared no effort to welcome us. So now we rejoice every time he rescues a lost sinner.

Jesus welcomes sinners! The Pharisees thought they were ridiculing Christ, but what they said was true! In fact, are there any more beautiful words? Jesus welcomes sinners! That means Jesus welcomes you and me! That clear fact brings confidence to your heart, comfort to your soul, and joy to your lips. You can now look forward to the grandest of welcomes in the glories of heaven where the Good Shepherd with open arms will tell you and every rescued sinner, "Welcome home!" Amen.