

"FRIEND OF SINNERS"

In 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade, I lived in a small town on the endless prairie of Saskatchewan, Canada. I remember a boy around my age who already was a type of social outcast.

- It amazes me now to think how everybody allowed this to happen, but in the ways that labeling by naming can happen in a small community, we all called him, "Stinky Willard."
- His name was "Willard," but we all added that demeaning preface. I don't recall anyone ever challenging it, "Hey, let's drop the 'stinky' part; that's kind of mean."
- He came from a hard family situation - poverty, alcoholism, more. He got his nickname "stinky" due to a lack of parental attention to hygiene and clean clothes. Not his fault.
- I was friendly to him, but I only went over to his house to play one time because I didn't feel safe ever going back.
- I have a memory of him running to our house for sanctuary when the mean boys were chasing him. I have a faint memory of my parents giving him a big old teddy bear.
- He was just a young boy who wasn't raised to know any better, growing up in a mean world, and for the most part the community response was to only make it worse for him.

There's a way to practice religion that's a lot like this, a way that ends up kicking vulnerable people who are already down.

- It starts out well enough, and with good intentions – "Let's make a list of rules for being good and God-pleasing people, and let's follow those rules with the very best of our abilities." – That's not so bad, is it? A guide for righteousness and justice. Seems good; it is good.
- But then this type of thinking creeps in – "Then we will be good people, and we can feel self-satisfied, and God will recognize our goodness, and any rewards we get, we'll deserve, because we'll know we're better than other people." - It kind of took a turn there, didn't it? Who's stinky now!
- It gets stinky when the pursuit of righteousness somehow turns into a self-righteousness which then somehow turns into a meanness toward and looking down upon other people.

Jesus wasn't like that. In fact, Jesus got into trouble with the leading religious people of his day, the Scribes and Pharisees, because he was a different kind of Rabbi. This summer I've been preaching on the early days of Jesus ministry from the 4th and 5th chapters of Luke.

- Jesus is popular. People flocked to him to hear his teaching.
- Jesus is not shy. He challenged people's self-centered ethnic pride. He challenged sickness and healed people. He challenged the spirits of evil and freed people from spiritual bondage. He called people to follow him.
- But then tension arises with the religious Pharisees when Jesus claims the authority to forgive sins that only God can forgive. Can Jesus forgive sins? Yes, he can.
- In today's reading Jesus offends the "we're better than others" religious sensibilities of the Pharisees even further by starting to hang out with the wrong kind of lowlife people.

Like most of these early ministry stories, this happened in Capernaum, Galilee, where Jesus lived as an adult. There's this tax collector, Levi, sitting at a tax booth.

- The tradition is that "Levi" and "Matthew" are different names for the same disciple.
- Everyone hated the tax collectors. They were seen as cheats and traitors.
- Mention of a "tax booth" tells us the kind of tax collector Levi was. The main road north to Damascus went through Capernaum. Levi was sitting in a toll-tax booth collecting road taxes for King Herod.
- Like how Jesus knew the first disciples before he called them, Jesus and Levi also would have surely known each other - Levi, the toll booth guy, and Jesus, the rabbi who was frequently on the roads on preaching missions to towns across Galilee.

I can imagine Jesus, who knew the hearts of people, seeing something in the heart of Levi yearning for a better world and to be a better person himself in it.

- I can imagine Levi, stirred by the message of this rabbi, but knowing he'd never be good enough to be accepted as a disciple.
- But then Rabbi Jesus does the unthinkable, he says to Levi of all people these two words, "Follow me."
- Not, "Try to be good." Not, "Believe in yourself and follow your heart." But, "Follow me."

Stunning! It's as if Jesus were to go back to my little boyhood town, filled with people who thought pretty well of themselves, as people often do, and then Jesus picked Stinky Willard of all people to be one of the inner circle of his chosen disciples. "What? Not him! He's stinky."

- "That's alright," Jesus says. "I've come to clean people up. Give them a better chance than others have given them."
- "That's alright," Jesus says. "I'm like a doctor. I'm here for sick people. If you don't think you're sick, you probably won't come to me anyway."
- That was the trouble with the Pharisees, they didn't see their own sinfulness, didn't smell their own stink or think they needed forgiveness. They were okay just the way they were.

It's the people who know they're sinners and not good enough on their own who are the kind more likely to realize how much they need Jesus, how much they need Jesus' healing and forgiveness, how much they need to repent and clean up - a change of heart and life.

The biggest roadblock to following Jesus is thinking you don't need Jesus because you're pretty good on your own without him.

- What a tragedy! Don't fool yourself. You're a sinner. You need Jesus.
- Don't worry, he'll accept you to be one of his followers.
- Jesus is a friend to outcasts and even sinners like you.

Amen.