

Sinners Welcome!

I don't know how many of you routinely use the east or "alley" door into the church, but if you do you will have noticed that we have a new sign. Right smack dab on the door. It says, "Welcome; First Mennonite Church; 620-947-5662." Guess which part is the biggest. The word "welcome!" Guess which part is second biggest. The word "church." As if to say, the fact that we are "First Mennonite" Church isn't what matters. What matters is, we are a church. The called, gathered people of God. And most importantly, everyone is welcome.

But do we mean it? Really? Is everyone truly welcome? Maybe that word should have an asterisk added, to clarify what we mean. Maybe the letters "u-n" should be added at the very beginning. In small print, of course! Very small print!

Jesus had just been teaching about the cost of discipleship, how high that cost is. So high that some are unwilling to pay it. And yet, all are invited. And for some, that is a problem.

At the beginning of the chapter, some *Pharisees and scribes were grumbling*. Complaining. Muttering, we could say.

We've met them before. Earlier in Luke. The Pharisees are a small group of first century purists, almost like a political party, who place high value on the Torah, their law, and following it to a T. Good for them! We have to admire them for their discipline and commitment.

The scribes were essentially scholars whose specialty was scripture. They both taught it and interpreted it. They were like the Pharisees' right-hand men. And together, they were grumbling. Why? Because *all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to Jesus, so they could listen to him!*

We've met these people before as well. Tax Collectors were Jews who worked for the Roman government. Their job was to collect the various taxes imposed on the Jewish people by the government. Because of which, they were despised by the Jews. Especially by the Jewish purists, aka the Pharisees and scribes. Why ever would Jesus the Jew welcome them?

And then we have "the sinners." Which pretty much applied to anyone who didn't follow the law as closely as the Pharisees and scribes did. "*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" Why would Jesus welcome them? And especially, why would he eat with them? You don't eat with sinners!

Jesus responds to the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes by telling them a story. A story that they should easily be able to relate to. Because it is about sheep.

A man has a hundred sheep. And one of them becomes "lost." That's all Jesus says. Just "lost." Now the man could (and probably should) simply cut his losses and focus on the ninety-nine he still has. I mean, what is one sheep when you still have ninety-nine? But no. The man leaves the ninety-nine. "*In the wilderness,*" Jesus adds. Where the ninety-nine will be vulnerable to predators! He could end up losing more than just the one. I mean, it doesn't even make sense. It's foolish. You cut your losses and move on.

Did you notice how Jesus begins his story with the words, "*Which one of you . . . does not leave the ninety-nine . . . and go after the one . . . ?*" Implying that any of them would do the same thing? Or at least should do the same thing?

And when the man finds it, he *lays it on his shoulders and rejoices*. Not just glad, or even happy. He rejoices! In fact, he plans a party, and invites both his friends and neighbors. He invites them to “*Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.*”

Now, I’ve lost a lot of things in my life. Car keys, wallet, hats, lots of hats. My wife. ☺I have even left my best classical guitar sitting in the middles of the street, driving off without it to a gig. I’ll never forget racing back home (this was in Wichita), and from several blocks away, seeing that guitar, still sitting in the middle of the street. Oh, I rejoiced! But I didn’t throw a party. That would have been a little over the top.

And Jesus decides to add a second story. “*Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it.*” Now a silver coin back then was worth about a day’s wages. So it wasn’t all that much money. But apparently it was to the woman. And she didn’t stop searching until she found it. She never gave up.

I’ve lost something, and looked in the same places over and over. I mean, give up already, multiple voices will be telling me! But I can’t help myself; I keep looking. And then, lo and behold, I’ll find it. In a place I’ve already looked at least three times. Explain that!

The woman is so happy with finding that one, measly silver coin, that she does exactly what the shepherd did. Threw an over the top, celebratory party, to which she invited her neighbors and friends. And apparently, they came!

This is how God is, Jesus is saying. In fact, not just God, but heaven in its entirety. Think of how noisy that would be! And all over just one sinner who repents! One measly, practically worthless person who was lost, and then found. And get this. It actually has nothing to do with their repentance. Think about it: A sheep and a coin can’t repent. No, it has everything to do with their simply being found.

What Jesus and Luke don’t ask us in this story within a story is: “Which one are we?” But today, the Holy Spirit is asking. Are we one of the scribes and Pharisees, grumbling over who Jesus just sat down with? Offering them something to eat, even? Grumbling over who just walked in through one of the many doors in our church? Doors we keep locked nearly 24/7, precisely so that won’t happen?

Or, are we one of the sinners? Who just want to hear what Jesus has to say? Because they’ve heard rumors. And now they feel a strange sense of new hope?

I hope it’s as clear to you as it is to me that we are all sinners. That God is looking for us. And he’ll never give up. Not until he finds us. And when he does, however long it takes, there will be a huge, noisy party in heaven. All because of you.

This is the meaning of grace. God loves each one of us so much—even those of us who are sinners. No, make that especially those of us who are sinners—that he goes out looking for us. And when he finds us, he throws the doors wide open. He doesn’t even wait for us to repent first.

When God says, when Jesus says, when scripture itself says that “sinners are welcome,” did you notice? There are no ifs, ands, or buts. And especially no asterisks. How can we not extend the same grace, not just to one another, but to everyone we meet? Whenever? Forever? Whatever their sin. Or quasi-sin. The purists, bless their heart, had it wrong.

I’ve seen some churches with outdoor signs that actually say “Sinners welcome here.” And I confess that I like that. I like that a lot. It’s the gospel in a nutshell. It’s the essence of our Holy Scripture, in a nutshell. For now, I’m just happy that we have the word “welcome” in bold letters on one of our doors. I think we should put them on all of our doors. And maybe even unlock them.

Amen.