

LIFE OVEN WITH JESUS: The Company We Keep

Jesus had a lot of good habits and some bad habits, depending on whom you asked. One of his bad habits, at least according to some, had to do with the company he kept. Now you probably know this, but so that we're on common ground, let's say it, then prove it: Jesus didn't keep company with the high and mighty, or the rich and powerful, or the popular and well liked. Of course his and their paths crossed occasionally - usually in a way that produced a confrontation - but his most common company were the sick, the lame, the social outcasts, the people of questionable reputation.

We've said it, now let's prove it. Matthew 9.9-11. This is the story of Jesus' call to Matthew to become one of his disciples.... There are TWO groups of outcasts in that story, aren't there? There are the tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. Love that! Most translations of that verse just say "sinners" - they don't add the adjective disreputable. But what a choice of words the New Living Translation makes. I imagine the bouncer at the door checking credentials: *"Sir, I'm sorry, but you're a reputable sinner. You're well known and well liked in your neighborhood, so your sins just aren't disreputable enough for Jesus. Come back when you've made a worse name for yourself."*

Anyway. Two groups of outcasts in the story of Matthew's call to be a disciple. One is the tax collectors and sinners. And the other is Matthew himself because he's a tax collector, and tax collectors as a group were about as disreputable as they came back in Jesus' day.

So outcast were the people around Jesus in the story we just read, that the Pharisees - the religious mucky mucks of the day - ask the other disciples, why does your teacher eat with such scum? Now other translations of THAT verse don't use the word scum, but it drives home the point. You're a rabbi, Jesus! You shouldn't be keeping company with people like that. LK 15.1-2 says basically the same thing....

There are other examples of Jesus' bad company. The woman at the well in John 4, who had two strikes against her. First, she was from Samaria, and Jews and Samaritans didn't socialize, to be kind; they looked down on each other, to be more blunt. But the Samaritan Jesus met at the well had a second strike against her. She had been married several times and the man she was living with when she met up with Jesus was not her husband. The woman, that is, was not an upstanding citizen in the community. And yet, Jesus sought her out and engaged her in conversation.

One other example of Jesus' company. LK 7.36-39, a passage that speaks for itself....

If Jesus were who everybody claims he is, he'd move away from that woman because she's a sinner. Prophets and prostitutes don't belong at the same table (the surmise is that the certain immoral woman of this Luke passage was in fact a prostitute).

Jesus didn't keep company with the rich and famous, with the high and mighty. He kept company with the outcast. Intentionally, it turns out. Back to Matthew 9, and get ready for one of the strongest put downs in the Gospels. VV.12-13....

The put down is in the final verse. I didn't come for people who THINK they're righteous. Get that! He's talking to the mucky mucks, and he's telling the mucky mucks I didn't come to spend time with people like you who think they're righteous... but really aren't. You're arrogant and rude and judgmental and I can tell that just from the way you've responded to this woman. Who KNOWS what else you are! I came to spend time with people like her, people who know they're sinners. Who know they're broken. Who know they make mistakes. Who can list their faults. I don't spend time with people who THINK they're righteous when they're not. I spend time with people who KNOW they're not righteous, when they're not. So open the doors and let the scum in; they're my people.

We're on a roll. Let's look at a passage from Luke 14.12-14. Jesus has just reminded people about the importance of humility.... When you hold a party, don't invite the connected, the popular, the familiar. Invite the people who never get invited to parties. Translation: Spend your time with the disconnected, the lowly, the outcast.

We've probably made the point. Now why is this our subject today? Because we're in the early stages of a series that's exploring how the life of Jesus can help shape our lives as his followers. What can we learn from his life that can affect ours? Today our focus is the company we keep. Not just the people we pal around with, or the people we call friends or confidants. But the people we consider as our equals in the eyes of God, the people we believe deserve our attention, our love and concern as followers of Jesus.

That was the main problem of the mucky mucks. When they looked at the tax collectors and the other disreputable sinners, they didn't see equals or peers. They saw refuse, the disgusting and degraded leftovers of society. They saw people with whom they neither had nor wanted anything in common, to whom they believed they owed nothing. So they reacted to them with judgment and ridicule. Jesus said he came to keep company with those people, the people the mucky mucks cast aside.

How do we apply this teaching? There are easy ways and hard ways. Let's do one of each. An easy way is when you drive through an economically challenged part of town, and you see people living in all manner of disrepair and you choose to believe those people are your brothers and sisters. Or on a tv newscast you see kids dressed in rags, and you have sympathy as you say to yourself, those kids are my brothers and sisters. Or a friend of yours makes some mistakes, gets into trouble, his or her life hits the skids, and you decide to stand by your friend. I'm not going to give up on him or her.

Those are the easy ways to apply today's teaching. Here's a hard one. Immigration. We're having lots of talk as a nation about immigration. It's a subject that stirs strident arguments among otherwise good friends. I'm not raising the subject to talk policy - Should build a wall? Are we deporting enough people? Those are political, policy questions on which I have my viewpoints just as you have yours. Not going there. I raise immigration to call attention to the way we think about people BEFORE we apply governmental policies:

When you think of the people some folks call illegal aliens, others call the undocumented, what's your FIRST thought? Not your first political opinion, but your heart's first response? Can you see yourself sitting with those people? Can you see yourself serving a meal to those folks? When think about people who in your opinion belong in the immigration debate, do you first see a brother or sister, a child of God? Or do you first see a law breaker? You're welcome to the policy views of your choice. Jesus says you're not welcome to the judgments of your choice about the people affected by your policy views.

I told you that was a harder way to apply the teaching, but as followers of Jesus, we don't get to pick and choose our spiritual family.

One final word that brings this matter home. There's one very personal reason why we should look without judgment on the outcasts of our day. We get a hint of it in Luke 17.7-10.... In our own very real ways WE are the outcast, WE are the unworthy, WE are the broken, the wounded, the disreputable sinners of our day. Sure, we mask our sin, we don't get in the same kind of trouble that the imprisoned sinners, or the indicted sinners, or the chronicled sinners do. But we are the outcast. We are unworthy. And yet, Jesus came for us; he came for you and all your brokenness. No matter how many people look at you with judgment and ridicule in their hearts, Jesus came for you. Since that's our good fortune, we cannot turn away from those we consider unworthy.

Who are the company you keep? There's a hurting world waiting to know.