

Sermon for February 10, 2019

“Jesus Hung Out With Bad People”

Luke 15:1-7, 7:36-39

Staunton Church of the Brethren

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Today we continue the series on the Bad Habits of Jesus. So far we have discovered quite an array of bad habits for our Savior. “Jesus told stories that didn’t make sense. Jesus loved to party. Jesus spit. Jesus procrastinated. Jesus appeared wasteful. Jesus was constantly disappearing. Jesus offended people. Jesus could be dangerous.” That’s quite a list. Don’t feel so bad about your bad habits anymore, do you? Or maybe you’ve discovered that you need to have a few more, if you want to be like Jesus.

Well, I want to warn you. Today’s bad habit of Jesus may just go too far for you. You are free to leave now if you don’t think you can handle it.

Leonard Sweet says that “Jesus had the bad habit of liking people who were not like others and whom others did not like. In fact, some of them were downright unlikable. Even demonic.”

I had an experience in my first church. I had read “The Road Less Travelled” by Scott Peck and liked it. So I moved on to his next book, “People of the Lie.” Well, I got into it and I couldn’t finish it. He spent time talking about how some people can appear demonic and he described the personalities and traits, and as I read it, in my mind, I saw a picture of a person in my church, and the more I read, the more I saw this person as demonic, and I had to stop. Yes, I was struggling to love that person, but the book was only making matters worse. Yes, some people are hard to love; but Jesus loved them.

The Pharisees and the scribes just couldn’t get over it. Jesus had tax collectors and all kinds of sinners coming to listen to him, and even when at a Pharisee’s house, a sinner came in and disrupted things by crying on Jesus’ feet before pouring ointment on them and wiping

them with her own hair. We can all imagine how disgusted the Pharisee was at this; and in his own home. “He should know what kind of woman this is.”

“Not only did Jesus hang with bad people, but he ate with them, healed them, and restored them to the community. Today, we would still be appalled by Jesus’ insistence on talking to, hanging out with, and touching some of the kinds of people we deem outcast in our society. Jesus was inclusive, but while he accepted people as they were, he didn’t affirm them as they were; he transformed them into the singular images of God they were created to be.”

Who are the bad people that get labeled by us today – the sinners – the threats – the lost - the ones we can’t stand to be around – don’t trust – are afraid of – think we’re better than? If I were to give you a moment to close your eyes and think of who these people are in your life, you wouldn’t have much trouble coming up with a few, I’m sure. From relatives, to neighbors, to people we work with, or people we pass on the street, to people in the public eye, politicians, global personalities. Without naming anyone, it’s interesting to think that I might be on someone else’s list. Think about that. Those law-abiding, but self-righteous Pharisees were hard to love, too.

“But Jesus said more than once that he came to seek and to save the lost. Jesus was born surrounded by animals and died surrounded by criminals. Jesus spent his life in the company of bad people and he died as he lived. But like those two thieves on the cross, nothing is automatic. You can be in the presence of Jesus and still not receive his love. On the cross, Jesus got 50 percent. So as we think about how lost and hopeless some people are, using that as a reason to hold back and not be like Jesus, we need to remember that Jesus loved, but he wasn’t always successful with it. It never kept him from trying... Jesus did not love the whole world so much that he loved no one in particular.”

Think about those characters that he called as disciples. I’ll bet they were on people’s lists. But Jesus can use “impetuous Peters, humble Andrews, stormy Jameses, slow Philips, tell it like it is Bartholomews, gloomy Thomases, calculating Matthews, diminutive Jameses, even-keeled Thaddaeuses, passionate Simons, calm Barnabases, confident John Calvins, up and down Martin Luthers, and you and me.

I love how in both our readings today, when challenged or criticized about his associations with sinners, Jesus moves into parables that convict. After the woman appeared in the Pharisee's home and anointed Jesus's feet and was condemned for it by the host, Jesus told a parable about two debtors, one owing 500 denarii and the other 50, and how both were forgiven their debts, but the one who had been forgiven more was far more grateful. All to say that the Pharisees didn't think they needed to be forgiven for very much, for they worked hard at obeying the laws. But this woman was now overwhelmed with gratitude and love at having been forgiven her sins. So much so that she washed his feet – Jesus' host had not done that. And she kissed his feet, but Jesus' host had not offered such a greeting.

In the other story, Jesus told the parable of losing one in a hundred sheep and how important it was to go in search of the one. And when he finds it he rejoices and calls all his neighbors together to celebrate with him. And even more than that, "there will be more joy in heaven over the one sinner who repents."

The Bible story is consistent. "God mourns over the wanderers, God is married to the backslider in Hosea... In fact, the best promises in the Bible are reserved for those who have wandered but return to the Lord – the prodigals, the backsliders, the lapsed, the rebels. It is one thing to love the Jesus of the past. It is quite another to love the Jesus of the present – in the outcast, the stigmatized, the unfriended, the exiled, the labeled, the imprisoned, the persecuted, the unlikable. In a world full of many religions, to live a Jesus life is to be interreligious – able to live amicably with and love people of many and of no religions.... Followers of Jesus are love people, people in love, reaching out to people in pain, often painful people.

This is difficult and challenging thinking and acting, but I'm glad you're still here. I want to end with an illustration. There is a motto found on the back of the 1945 Berlin Rubbish and Ruins Paintings. It says, "Nothing can be so ugly that it would be impossible to make something good out of it." Not familiar with these paintings? I wasn't either. There is an example in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. It's called "butterfly art." As Sweet tells it, "each butterfly is on a nine-inch square of plywood. The information on a typed sheet of paper glued to the back

of each piece explains that it was made out of the rubble of Berlin. Bits of brick, glass, and other building materials have been fastened to the surface of the plywood. The text painted or printed on the front of each piece of plywood says, "In memory of summer 1945", and beneath the butterfly is the "signature," "Made of the rubbish of the ruins of Berlin."

(Okay, Sydney, can you show one of the pictures?)

"Members of the Third Armored Division in WW II either bought or were given these butterflies and brought them back to the States. Typed on each piece of paper glued to the back of the plywood are these words:

"When the battle of Berlin was over, they met again, just a small group of friends: some painters and designers, and a woman well acquainted with all kinds of fancy-work. They looked around and none of them said a word. What should they say, what did they feel facing the dead under blooming lilacs and the smouldering ruins of their beloved town? With the churches burnt out and their old windows beautifully colored gone to pieces, the bridges fallen down into the river, the rails bent and the trees burst, and with mountains of rubbish barring the streets once full of life. What should they do looking at a chaos like this that seemed to have put an end at last to a long but wrong way? Life must go on. It broke the silence. One of them said, they ought to make something of the rubbish that was left. But what?"

(Sydney, you can show the next picture.)

"During the summer 1945 in Berlin, butterflies were made piece by piece by the clever and patient hands of men and women who had no paints and brushes to work with and no canvas or paper to work on but who were ready to do almost everything. The light blue color of one butterfly was made from the tiles of a fine delicatessen in Potsdamer Platz, and the red brown from the bricks of an old building of Wilhelmstrasse. These butterflies do not look like precious works of art. But those who made them believed that nothing was so ugly that something good and true and beautiful could not be made out of them."

In Jesus' eyes, we are all rubbish art. What do you see when you look around?