



Pastor Gwen's Message  
 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
 "We are known for the Company We Keep."  
 Sunday, June 11, 2023

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In Sioux Falls South Dakota, there is an ELCA college, Augustana University. And Paul, it is Swedish in tradition. Several decades ago, they received a donation of \$1,000,000 from a distinguished alumnus, the state's governor Nils Boe. His request was to have the money used to bring leaders of international prominence to the campus to speak on world issues. His request led to the likes of Barbara Bush, Colin Powell, Margaret Thatcher and Mikkel Gorbechev. They all spoke to standing room only crowds thanks to the Boe Memorial Fund.

Years later, a billboard about Augustana was seen for miles claiming the slogan, "We're Known by the Company We Keep". Above that slogan were posted pictures of those famous speakers. Although most likely we would consider that slogan today politically unacceptable, it signaled to motorists of that time, that this school was a school of prominence to lure in new students. After all, if Augustana was good enough for these world leaders to lecture there, it must be a great school to attend.

As you may know, I have a Philosophy degree from St Olaf in Northfield Minnesota, which is also an ELCA college, Norwegian in tradition. Our claim to fame is a bit more out of the ordinary. St Olaf is more widely known as where Rose Nyland, aka Betty White, from the Golden Girls, went to school. Although, Ms. White only visited our campus once in 1992, she brings a certain quality to the St. Olaf name. When I attended in the 1970's I was impressed on move in day that there were so many limos with drivers moving in freshman, while my dad and I came in our Buick. My junior counsellor was Merilee Dole. Name sound familiar, yup. So, I did have many senators and other influential kids in my midst. But none

were advertised on billboards. And I am pretty sure since I graduated my face is not on one either.

So, what do you think about the statement; We are known by the company we keep? Have you ever joined a group that made you feel prestigious? Have you found yourself acting differently when in a group of like-minded people? Did that give you a safe or superior feeling? If we are honest with ourselves, I think that we will admit that if the company we keep is of high quality, sound character and deep conviction, it speaks well of us. But to the contrary, if the company we keep includes people of questionable character or of checkered reputation, well, that speaks poorly of us. Guess that tells us that there is a downside to all those trusted old adages.

We teach our children, that they should choose good friends and we try to steer them away from friends that they may acquire bad habits from. It is true that we live in a world that judges us by the reputation of our friends, guilt by association of you will. Certainly not fair, but it happens, none the less.

Would we encourage our children to hang out with the people Jesus hung out with? Probably not, as we encourage them to choose their friends wisely. But folks Jesus knew just what he was doing when he surrounded himself with earthly, off-color, and questionable characters of his day. Jesus was defying logic and Mosaic law when we ate with sinners, healed the sick, the lame and the blind. And the religious zealots hated him for it.

Our Gospel text from Matthew today is a lesson, a case in point. Jesus is walking in the streets of Capernaum, a small fishing village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee when he sees a sign over a door, "Matthew, IRS agent", or whatever a tax collector's office would say in the day. Actually, Matthew did not need a sign. Everyone knew who he was; a corrupt man who overtaxed people and took a good portion of what he collected for his own pocket. Kind of reminds me of the epitome of the first century Mafia. And as long as he sent just enough to Rome, he could keep his job. But the people hated him. He could have people thrown in jail for not paying enough tax and he did. And even though Matthew was a Jew, he had aligned himself with the Roman government, the enemy in the eyes of most people in Capernaum.

And so, Jesus enters and there is Matthew, the tax collector. Jesus invites Matthew to become part of his team. And Matthew followed Jesus and then invites him to his home to share a meal with his friends, other tax-collectors. And then the Pharisees are astonished at Jesus' behavior once again. He is eating with sinners and tax-collectors. Jesus' logic prevails in the argument when he says, "For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." Jesus came to heal the sinners. He did not come to hang out with the religious, pompous, healthy, and proud. He came to hang out with people who needed his grace, sinners.

When I was in high school, I big some babysitting. There were three boys next door and their parents seemed to call me quite often. And I could see why. The parents even gave me whistle so I could quiet them down when they were too obnoxious. And remember those where the days when you made 25 cents an hour. The middle boy, Mark, was the one that I could talk to the best. I asked him if he thought his parents loved him and his

brothers. He told me that his parents loved them all. He said, "Sometimes when I am really sad, they love me the best and when Craig does something really naughty, mom and dad seem to love him more." What an insight for a 10-year-old. Whichever child is sick, afraid, scared or naughty, has the most need of love. WOW.

And is that so different from Jesus' answer to the religious leaders in Capernaum? We tend to show our love more to those who appear to need it at the moment. It is rather ironic to me that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century things are still the same. Where there is need, God answers.

We move in circles of religious people. Do you have any friends that do not go to church? Do you have friends that drink alcohol to access or curse up a storm? I don't have many of those types of friends and I think if I did you would probably question what to think about me. We are known by the company we keep! Might even taint my reputation, such as it is, around Park Falls, yes?

Truth is that we are judged by the people we surround ourselves with and things that we do. And we like feeling good about ourselves. We like to think of ourselves as people with a high moral character and good values. After all we are religious because we are here today sitting in the pews. And we like to be around people who look a lot like us. But folks, the truth is we are all sinners. We think things we should not think, we do things that we should not do, and we say things we should not say. Pride is probably one sin that is contagious in groups of like-minded people. And don't kid yourself, God knows your heart. He can see into us even in our private times when we think no one is watching.

Remember our message from last week, the Great Commission. We are to go out and baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and teach everything that Jesus has commanded us to do. Matthew 28. That means us, you and me, and this is the teaching of Jesus in our Gospel today. No matter how sinful, we are all called to Christ. We are called to follow his teaching as he has shown us a better way to live. We are called to be the hands and feet of Jesus in this 21<sup>st</sup> century world. God loves us each so much he has given us the tools to minister to others even if they don't look, talk, feel or act like us. Jesus' mercy, sacrifice, promises, and love are for all.

And now let me close with a story from Tony Campolo, who is a writer, teacher, speaker, and progressive Christian.

Tony tells of the time he was speaking in Hawaii and could not sleep because his body-clock was on Eastern Time. So, at 3 o'clock in the morning, Tony went to an all-night coffee shop. While he was there, a group of prostitutes came in and sat at a table together. One of them remarked to the others, "Tomorrow is my birthday." To which another of the prostitutes responded, "Big Deal! What do you want, a birthday party?" The birthday girl said, "NO, I was just telling you that it is my birthday." "Besides," she said, "I have never had a birthday party. I would not know how to act."

When the women left, Tony asked the waiter about the women. "Oh, they come in every night at about the same time." Tony asked about the woman in the blue dress. "That is

Dorothy”, the waiter said. “well, you know, tomorrow is Dorothy’s birthday,” Tony said. “What if we had a birthday party for her right here in the café?”

The waiter thought it was a great idea, so at 2 o’clock the next morning Tony came in with crepe paper and balloons and decorated the café. The waiter had called a bunch of Dorothy’s friends and he had even made a cake that said, “Happy Birthday DOROTHY”. When Dorothy walked in, everybody began singing, “Happy Birthday” to her, and her eyes filled with tears.

When Tony got ready to leave, the waiter asked him a question. “What do you do, Tony?” And Tony said, “I am a minister.”

“A minister! What kind of a church do you work at?”

Tony said, “I am a minister at a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3 o’clock in the morning.”

“No, you’re not” the waiter said, “because I’d go to a church like that.”

I do like new ideas, but not to worry, I don’t think I will be throwing birthday parties for prostitutes any time soon. Probably couldn’t stay awake until 3 am anyway. But we do need to give thought to being a church for all sinners. That is the church that Jesus has called us to be. Thanks be to God. AMEN