

OUR REDEEMER LUTHER CHURCH
10th S. after Pentecost
John 15:5, 12-14 “Friend of Sinners”

Iowa City, Iowa
August 2, 2015

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Our text is from this past week’s reading program, John 15, and will help us talk about one of the more interesting titles given to Jesus: “Friend of Sinners.” His enemies gave Him that designation, meant, of course to be derogatory, critical, negative.

How did Jesus come by it? The old-fashioned way—He earned it! He earned it by truly being a friend to all sorts and types of people—especially those people who were rejected by the religious establishment.

He earned it by being a friend to a person such as Matthew. Matthew was a tax collector, worked for the Romans, and was considered a traitor, was hated by the people. When Jesus calls Matthew to be His follower and eats at his house, along with other “tax collectors and sinners,” the Pharisees gave Jesus His title: “Friend of Sinners.”

While His enemies meant it to be hurtful, Matthew would have used the phrase to describe Jesus for a very different reason—a very positive one, for he knew Jesus as a Friend who cared.

Jesus got the same reaction when He went to visit in the home of Zacchaeus, another famous tax collector. He had cheated the people. No question about it. He had gotten wealthy off the people, no question about it. He had sinned, no question about it! But Jesus showed His care, concern and love for Zacchaeus and Zacchaeus responded with faith and generosity. Zacchaeus would have said, “Jesus is a Friend of sinners, and am I ever glad!”

What was it that attracted people to Jesus? He cared for them! No hidden agenda. Nothing in it for Him. Not in order to gain some personal advantage. Only in order to do what a friend does: He cared!

Our Redeemer is a congregation that believes Jesus still has that reputation today: Friend of Sinners. We believe this to be an appropriate title for Jesus because we have known Him to be OUR Friend as we have struggled through the realities of living in this fallen world.

As you look around this congregation, who do you see? You see people like you and me—people who have given into temptation at times instead of resisting it; people who have bought into the world’s pattern of thinking and living and, often have simply disregarded God’s voice. You see people who have squandered our opportunities to help and serve others, who have been greedy, selfish, hurtful. Yes, hypocritical at times.

If you came here this morning to see “beautiful people”—untouched by sin and evil, unblemished, unaffected by Satan’s working, then you are going to be disappointed. For while there may be no “tax collectors” here this morning, there are ONLY Sinners.

But we have met One who is the Friend of Sinners!

What a Friend we have in Jesus All our sins and griefs to bear
What a privilege to carry Everything to God in prayer.

“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:13
That is what our Friend Jesus did for us! That is why we are proud to call Him, “Friend of Sinners” because He is our friend. We come back to Him because He cares! That’s what friends do, they care!

“Cast all your anxiety upon him, for he cares for you!”

We have a caring connection with our Friend Jesus. This is not something superficial, a meaningless attachment, an external connection; as we read in John 15:5, this connection has depth: “I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

How close is a branch to a vine? They are so close that they have life flowing between them, the sustaining nourishment needed for life. Just so close are we to Jesus, our Friend.

And because of the caring connection between Christ and ourselves, what you see in this church this morning is nothing but saints, for Christ has cleansed the church, each of us branches, each of us sinners: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the Word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” Eph. 5:25ff.

Saints and Sinners are gathered together this morning, and they are both us. DCE Seth had a license plate that had the letters SNT SNR. He knew the reality; we know it too. And we have come together today to spend time with and hear from our Friend.

But Jesus did not connect us to Himself, cleanse us of sin through our Baptism and the Word, call us His friends, only for our own benefit, so that we might sit back and take life easy in a do-nothing style of Christianity. He calls us to bear much fruit. “This is to my Father’s glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

The manner of bearing fruit that is most pleasing to the Lord is stated by Jesus: “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” V. 12

Another way of saying that would be to say: “Be a friend, and let the caring connection continue.” We who have been “cared for” are to be “caring.”

I once had a desk calendar with quotes about friends: “If you sow kindness, you will reap a crop of friends.” “A friend is one who comes to you when all others leave.” “Your best friend is the one who is a friend without expecting anything.” “Those who seek faultless friends will remain friendless.”

So, what does it mean to be a friend, one who is connected to the Friend of Sinners?

Recognize the sinner and saint in people you work and live with; explain their actions in the kindest way. Be ready to forgive their failings, their sins. A Friend Forgives!

A Friend Listens. Be a sensitive and caring listener. Before you jump in with your 2 cents worth, let your friend offer their full nickel.

A Friend loves in word and deed. Words are important, but can be cheap and easy; the harder thing is to back up our words with deeds of love, verifying and demonstrating our love and fulfilling Jesus’ words: “As I have loved you.”

A Friend shares the joy of being a believer in Christ. There is no greater gift you can offer a friend than to share with them the Good News about our Friend, Jesus.

“Lord, thank You for being a Friend to us sinners; empower us to be friends to one another.” Amen.