

APRIL 2007 LINK ARTICLE

ALL ARE WELCOME

“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Luke 15:2

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us;... 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

There were some religious leaders in Jesus' time called Pharisees and Scribes. These people were making accusations against Jesus. They said that he welcomes sinners and eats with them. They were claiming that Jesus was hanging around with “Bad” people. He was even eating with them. When you eat with someone, especially in their home, it implies an intimate relationship; it's not just being nice and speaking with someone you happen to meet on the street. Eating with someone is personal, just ask the kids in school. When students get a chance to decide who they will eat with at lunch time at school, they won't just eat with anybody. Kids know that who you eat with says something about you.

Jesus was guilty as charged. He did welcome sinners and eat with them and it did say something about him and who he cared about. When accused of welcoming and eating with sinners Jesus went on to explain his actions by telling a parable. In the parable Jesus contrasts the welcome a sinful son receives from his older brother and his father. The older brother offers judgment, justifiable judgment, just like the Pharisees and the Scribes. The father offers unjustifiable acceptance and reconciliation, just like God.

I wonder what a survey would reveal about people's perception of “the church.” If we were to do a “man on the street” poll, do you think people's perceptions of “the church” would be one of acceptance and reconciliation or of judgment? I'm not asking about what churches are really like but what the perception is.

Phillip Yancey in his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* tells the story of a prostitute who came for help to feed her two-year-old daughter. Through tears she told how she had rented out her child to support her drug habit. She was asked why she never went to the church for help. She replied, “The church? Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse.”

I remember a woman from a previous congregation, telling me about her sister who hadn't been to church in a long time. The sister told her “I've almost got my act together so that I can go back to church.” She felt that she had to “get it together” before she could go to church. These people's perception is that church is about judgment.

I wonder why many people have the perception that the church is about judgment? Is it because they think God is about judgment, or do they think God is about judgment because they experience the church as being judgmental? Paul in his letter to the

Corinthians tells us that we are ambassadors for Christ. We are to represent Jesus. Paul reminds us that God reconciled himself to us through Jesus. We are to be ambassadors of Christ. Jesus is going to make his appeal through us. Paul reminds us that Jesus didn't hold our trespasses, or sins against us. As a matter of fact, God came as Jesus because of our sins to bring us back to God.

In his faith story, our own Russ Brugman gave St. Ansgar's some pretty high praise. He talked about how he was never a church person. He hadn't been a very good person. He had made a lot of mistakes in his life. When Russ finally felt the urge to go to church he came to visit St. Ansgar's one Sunday. He said that from the first day he walked through the doors he has felt welcome, thanks be to God.

In her temple talk advocating for the hungry, our own Penny Oleson told of a Lutheran church that reached out to her family in their time of need, and they weren't even members of that church. Recently, I was dropping off some paper bags to the food shelf here in town. The woman working there asked me what church I was from. When I told her she thanked me for the support that St. Ansgar's gives to the food shelf.

We have an opportunity to do great things for Christ. May we, St. Ansgar's Lutheran Church, be accused of welcoming sinners and eating with them. May God continue to call on us to be his ambassadors. May he make his appeal through us as we help the needy and help people be reconciled to Christ. Amen.

Easter blessings to you.
Pastor Arthur Sharot