

I counted him my best friend in those days. When I had a free moment I would wander down to his welding shop to waste some of his time. We talked of the weather, of politics, of God, of golf. Mostly golf because we enjoyed competing against one another. Once we even wagered that the winner of our golf match would be treated to an add in the paper, paid for by the loser, ^{The ad included my name} ~~that said~~, Lynn Schlessman is a better golfer than I, signed, Rick Gordon. ~~That is the way it appeared, you see, I won.~~

He was not a church member, ^{he had a machine shop,} ~~but he was a member of the church.~~ He'd ~~been a philosophy major in college before he had taken up fixing farm equipment.~~ I knew how he billed his accounts. Farmers who were prosperous paid a fair price, farmers who were struggling to make ends meet paid little or nothing. That kept Rick kind of poor, finally he had to find some other work to do.

Since he never went to church he did not know who belonged where. Sometimes he'd ask if so and so was a member of my church. many times I was pleased to say, yes. But sometimes I wished I could have told him no. You see, people knew people in that small town. They knew who cheated on their wife, who treated their workers poorly, they knew who could be counted on in a pinch, and who could be counted on to do the pinching. Some of the folks that heard my preaching each week were not so good. They were ^{not} even average, or even below average, they were ^{mostly} ~~just plain~~ bad. The only way you could tell they had anything to do with Jesus was the smell of communion wine on thier breath on a Sunday morning.

I hated to tell Rick ^{that some of those} ~~those sorts of~~ people were part of my congregation. I knew that I would be judged by the company I kept. I felt like a failure,

I knew Jesus' words, Judge not that you be not judged, for with the judgement you pronounce you will be judged. Still I was ashamed. *Paul*

I wonder ~~with~~ ^{if} Jesus' disciples were ashamed that day. The fishermen, Peter, James, John, Andrew. They were honest ~~men~~, hard working ~~men~~ ^{respected,} ~~responsible~~ ~~men~~. Jesus called, they followed. But then Jesus called him. Matthew. ~~That must have made his blood boil.~~

Matthew was a tax collector. He made his living by collecting taxes for the occupying power, Rome. Matthew's own people had been conquered, and Matthew was a traitor, taking the side of the enemy. And if ~~it~~ ^{that} was not bad enough ~~that~~ ^{that} he collected taxes for Rome, he also was extorting whatever more he could take for himself. At least that is what the historians of that day tell us. To ~~who~~ ^{to whom} in our day could we compare to Matthew? A mafia extorter? A drug kingpin? ~~scoundrel~~

Well, those other disciples who had answered Jesus call to follow might have thought well maybe Jesus sees into Matthew's heart and knows he is really a good man on the inside. But then Jesus ^{went} ~~goes~~ to sit at table ^{with} ~~with~~ tax collectors and sinners. In that culture to eat with someone was to say, I am one with you, like you, you are like me. In that culture people were truly judged by the company ^{with whom} they ate, ~~with~~. So the Pharisees asked Jesus' disciples, why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners.

And Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, I have not come ^{I desire} mercy not sacrifice to call the righteous but sinners.

Peter and Andrew and James and John, lumped together with all who are sick. Jesus had called them.

And Matthew

And me, and you.

Though I knew better, I wanted Rick to believe that members of my church were a cut above. For then that would mean that I am a cut above. I wanted to be honored by the elite group of people Jesus had hand picked for me. But I felt dishonored, ashamed.

the words of Jesus said,

So today I am the one to whom ~~Jesus is saying~~, I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

God speaks those words. God desires mercy from us, from you, from me. Not sacrifice? In this context that word means religious observance. Sacrifice. Not an outward pretending to honor God but a deep inward honoring of God by loving those whom Jesus loves. Those needing a physician.

Can a despicable person find a home here among us? Will we invite the people we respect most to come here and gladly introduce them to the least honorable among us? Will we follow Jesus into those groups of people ~~with~~ whom ~~someone would never~~ expect to find us?

Always in life ~~we~~ seek to quarantine sickness. Sickness has great power, health must be protected against it.

Jesus believed the power of God is greater. Instead of isolating sickness as the Phisees did, Jesus rushed right in where ~~their~~ ^{there} were ~~the~~ sick in sin, believing that his goodness would infect them.

Too often we have believed in the power of evil rather than the power of God. We protect ourselves from evil as if our goodness is so fragile and evil so powerful.

But Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners and says, Follow me.

Is the power of Jesus' love and forgiveness greater than the power of evil and hatred? Is the power of Jesus life greater than the power of death? Jesus bet his whole life on that, he says, follow me.