

“THE COMPANY WE KEEP,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, April 3, 2022

In our gospel lesson for this morning (*Mark 2:13-17*) we are on the road with Jesus at a point when his ministry is gathering strength. His is a fresh voice. Many throughout the countryside are eager to hear Jesus.

But for every four or five men and women who hang on his word, there are one or two, especially coming from the strict Pharisee party, who in their own devotion to Judaism resent Jesus as an upstart rabbi. They are gunning for him. Determined to stop Jesus in his tracks, they are quick to seize upon anything and everything that can discredit him. For the Pharisees and others the perfect moment comes when Jesus sits down to a meal with tax collectors.

Now, who likes taxes? I know I don't. Filing estimated taxes and that annual April tax return are a pain. In fact, death and taxes are the two things that seem to provoke the greatest dread in the hearts of men and women everywhere. Yet the tax collector was a particularly hated figure in Jesus' time. For one, tax collectors were usually fellow Jews who were collaborating with the much-reviled Roman occupation forces that were so oppressive. Second, tax collectors did what they did for money. Essentially, they were helping Rome while helping themselves, pocketing profits. Finally, tax collectors had an unsavory reputation for being less than honest and scrupulous. With Roman authority to back them up, they could extort money from people in the guise of taxes. Ordinary Jews had little recourse to protest, let alone refuse payment.

As a Jew, Jesus knew all these terrible things about tax collectors. Yet when one of them, named Levi, invites him into his own home after listening to a roadside sermon, Jesus accepts the offer of hospitality. He enters the tax collector's house and shares a sit-down meal—not only with Levi but also a gang of Levi's tax collector friends and cronies whom he has taken the liberty of inviting to this banquet with a special guest. Jesus's Pharisaic foes express outrage, eager to seize the opportunity to discredit him. Look, look, they are quick to exclaim. Look at the crowd with whom Jesus hangs out! Their outrage implies that if Jesus is in bad company, he must be bad too.

Yet Jesus refuses to be cowed and intimidated by his critics' smear tactics. Although he too may have been somewhat surprised to find himself as the speaker at what now looks like a tax collectors' convention, there's no defensiveness on his part. In an ironic retort that still echoes across the ages, Jesus simply explains: “People who are well do not need a doctor, but only those who are sick.” He adds: “I have not come to call respectable people, but outcasts.” (*Mark 2:17*) Basically, Jesus is reminding everyone who has ears to hear that he is engaged in ministry—not idle fraternization—and that the

God whom he embodies and represents genuinely cares about those whom everyone else considered worthless outcasts.

In the end, Jesus' decision to spend time with the vilified tax collectors is more than vindicated. Although the respectable Pharisees who are so quick to criticize Jesus imagine themselves as too good to need him, at least one of the outcasts becomes one of Jesus' most devoted disciples. That's right. New Testament scholars believe that Levi, who invited Jesus to his home and hosted fellow tax collectors to introduce them to Jesus, subsequently changed his name to mark his change of heart and faith. As Matthew, he became one of Jesus' twelve apostles. He also went on to write the first of four gospels that preserve Jesus' message.

In light of this extraordinary conversion story of a tax collector to an apostle, we do have cause to turn the tables and be critical of the Pharisees who were so hard on Jesus and eager to take him to task. But, even if we do so, we also need to be a little careful here and not relish the opportunity overmuch. Because the fundamental problem with the Pharisees is not that they should question the company the Jesus keeps but, rather, the fact that they *maliciously* do so in order to entrap him and run him down. In their out-and-out hostility towards Jesus they don't understand or simply can't accept that Jesus is God's son and truly exceptional. Under any other circumstances, whom Jesus is hanging out with would matter a lot more. As for the rest of us, who are not Jesus, the company we keep really does matter—always has, always will.

Back in Jesus' day, the company kept was a particularly sensitive issue. The Romans had conquered Jerusalem and all the lands of historic Israel. Among those who considered themselves most faithful to traditional Jewish ways, there was rampant anxiety that the Romans would conquer Jewish hearts and minds too. Self-appointed defenders of the faith stood ready to criticize anyone who in their view was getting too cozy with Roman rule and its pagan culture. But good Jewish parents also worried that their children were being seduced by Roman values, which included looser sexual mores, more bared skin, and an emphasis on sports and games.

On the one hand, all of us, including our children, have to live in our times and go with the flow, so-to-speak—to one extent or another. As commanded by God, it's important for people of faith to be open, generous, and helpful to others, including strangers. On the other hand, no parents in any time or age want to see loved ones, let alone children, lose what matters most—namely, their spiritual well-being and salvation.

I wouldn't want to count myself among the Pharisees. Nevertheless, I am sympathetic to the ancient Jewish concern about negative influences that can sweep us up and along because of the company that we keep. For people of faith, it's a contemporary problem too. Consider drugs. Since 2020 drug overdoses in the United States have surged 31 per

cent. There has been a five-fold increase in deaths from drug overdoses. An estimated two million Americans in cities and suburbs alike are heroin users. Amid our pandemic that sounds like an epidemic to me. In order to get a drug like heroin you have to know somebody who using it or selling it. It's a matter of the company we keep and the crowd we run with whether we are kids or adults. The same goes for a host of other opiates, as well as plethora of no less addictive, self-destructive behaviors that seem so rife and rampant today.

Several years back, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University in New York City released the results of an exhaustive survey conducted with the participation of a thousand American teenagers. The survey affirmed and reiterated what most on-the-ball parents already know in our guts. Namely, the importance of peer influence. Specifically, the study declared that "spending time with a bunch of risk-taking friends is one of the most dangerous things that a teenager can do, particularly in an unsupervised setting." In other words, kids who run with a risk-taking crowd are more likely to engage in self-destructive risk-taking themselves. Yet I bet our social scientists would discover almost the same thing if they polled and surveyed a thousand full-grown adults.

As Americans—and Christians no less—most of us like to think optimistically. Our perennial hope is that good people are going to be the leaven in every group and gathering, helping it rise to the best. That can happen. Jesus was leaven for every crowd in which he mingled. But, sadly, there is also wisdom in old adage that a rotten apple can spoil the whole barrel. In fact, the nicest people can end up talking or doing the most dastardly things because they are in the thrall of destructive ringleader or two. "Group think" and a "mob mentality" then lead them to suspend their own conscience, defeating their own better natures.

I had a college roommate from northern Florida who grew up in a small town Baptist Church. As he told it, the church's reigning motto was "We don't smoke, dance or chew—and don't associate with them that do." That sounds pretty narrow-minded and exclusionary, doesn't it? All the same, without going overboard and engaging in rank judgmentalism, we do need to be concerned about exposures and influences that might tempt us or our young people and lead them astray. For our own benefit we may need to tune out hateful and destructive voices and altogether avoid their company so that we aren't polluted by what they are trying to incite. Think of that young man who got caught up with some older guys in the plot to kidnap our Michigan governor. He now claims he was naïve and duped. No matter what a jury decides over the next several weeks, his life is probably ruined.

As we noted earlier, one of the reasons why Jesus could mix with “bad company” is because he was above sin. As his encounter in the wilderness shows, not even the devil himself could tempt him. Consequently, Jesus could mingle with deeply disturbed and troubled people without any spiritual peril to himself. Similarly, we need be morally and spiritually well-grounded before we risk flirting with temptation and trouble. Although we are Christ’s disciples, we should all be discerning and judicious and about the company we keep.

Today, as we all know, there are a lot of people who have dispensed with both Jesus and the church. Their stock line goes something like this... “I don’t need Jesus or the church because I am already a good person.” Sorry, folks. But I have to disagree. None of us are ever as good as we suppose we are. Moreover, in battling sin and the negativity and destructiveness that lurks in all of us the best defense is a good offense. It’s not only important to avoid a bad crowd but also to be part of a good one.

Did you know that more than 600 scientific studies conducted over the last fifteen years or more reveal that church-goers experience “greater well-being, greater self-satisfaction with life, less depression, less anxiety, a lower suicide rate, [are] more hopeful and optimistic, [suffer] less cardiovascular disease, [enjoy] lower blood pressure, and [live] longer?” That’s according to Dr. Harold G. Koenig who heads up Duke University’s Center for the Study of Religion, Spirituality, and Health. All this also translates into far fewer addictions of any kind, plus substantially less chance of ever being involved in criminal activity. Yes, Jesus and church-going make a big difference for our lives. We’re good company to keep.

I don’t generally read the funnies much. But there was a cartoon in the *Detroit Free Press* that caught my eye some Easters back. Entitled “For Better or Worse,” the cartoon featured a family attending an Easter morning service. Sitting in the pew a son asks his mother if church is open year-round. When she answers “Yes,” he asks in turn: “Why then do we only come to church twice a year?” The innocence of the question should make us think. It’s a wise question, indeed. It’s a case of truth from the mouth of babes.

Friends, any pandemic notwithstanding, our church is open year-round too—both live and live-streamed. Whether we are young or old, we all need to make the most of the opportunity for good company that it provides. The Apostle Paul was right on mark when he advised the Philippians “to pay attention to those who follow the right example...” (*Philippians 3:17*) In this Easter season ahead and then beyond, as we celebrate Christ’s resurrection, let’s all recommit ourselves to being part of Christ’s body week after week and encourage others, young and old, to do so as well. **Amen.**

