

Have you ever visited a church, and not felt welcome? Many years ago, just after moving to Calgary, I went to an area Reformation service. I had to walk for over an hour to get there (I didn't have a car yet), and I was running late. I almost couldn't find the place, but eventually I did. I felt quite awkward walking up to that church – I could hear that everyone was already singing. It was my first year of living in that area, and no one knew me.

I slowly opened the big wooden door of that church and quietly stepped into the entry way. That entry way was very small – about the size of two phone booths, put together. I did my best to act like I belonged there, but deep down, I felt awkward. The ushers were sitting on chairs in the worship area facing forward – they were so busy singing their hymns that they didn't notice me. I looked around, but I could see that there was no place to sit. And there weren't any hymnals either, so I just stood there, trying to look cool.

But I wanted to get out of there. I saw that there was a side entrance with a hallway, and maybe that would be a better place to stand. So, I walked out of the church and over to that side entrance. I found a little hallway, about the size of one phone booth, between the outside door and the door leading into the worship area. I spread out my bulletin on the floor and sat on it, and listened to the service, resting my head and my arms on my knees. I decided that I would stay long enough to hear the sermon and then go home.

But right when the sermon started, an older woman got up – I'll never forget this - and walked over to me. She looked down at me, sitting on the floor, and she whispered to me that it was too drafty. And so, she shut the door on me, and I was left sitting out in the hallway where I couldn't hear or see anything. I was shut out, so I went home.

Have you ever felt unwelcome at a church? When non-LCC visitors come to our churches for the first time, they probably feel more awkward than we really know. Are you welcoming them, or shutting them out? In Jesus’ day, a lot of people were being shut out of church. The Pharisees were the religious leaders, and they oversaw the synagogues. That’s where they had their church services, where they read God’s Word and sung the psalms.

But certain people were not welcome there. Tax collectors – not welcome. Sinners – people with immoral lifestyles – not welcome. Only the good people, the upstanding members of society, the moral, pious, “normal” people – only they were welcomed at the synagogues.

But the Pharisees saw that Jesus treated the tax collectors and the sinners differently. In verses 1 and 2 we are told that the Pharisees were saying to themselves, “This man Jesus welcomes sinners and tax collectors, and he even eats with them.” “Why is he doing that?” they probably wondered.

Jesus knew what they were thinking, and so he went on to tell them two short stories. The first is the parable of the lost sheep. There’s a hundred of them, and one of them gets lost. What does the shepherd do? He goes and searches for that lost sheep. And when he finds it, he puts it on his shoulders, takes it home, and throws a big celebration.

The same thing happens in the parable with a woman who loses a silver coin. She lights her lamp, sweeps out her whole house until she finds that one lost coin. And when she finds it, she gathers her friends and neighbors and celebrates.

Jesus’ main point with these stories is this – he is doing mission work. That’s why he’s welcoming tax collectors and sinners. They are lost sheep, lost coins. Jesus was welcoming them because he loved them. And if even just one of

them would repent, then there would be great rejoicing among the angels in heaven.

Do you have the same approach to mission work as Jesus? Are you out there, with the sinners of our society today, talking with them, listening to them, looking for a way to share the Word of God with them? Are you someone who welcomes sinners?

Sometimes we're like those Pharisees, aren't we? We're selective with who we would like to come into our church. If you're a good person, if you have your act together, then come on in. But if you have problems, if you're struggling with some different sins in your life, we would rather that you stay away. Only the good people who have their act together are welcome in this church. Not the sinners. We all have sinful natures that make us think that way sometimes. Let's do mission work, we say, but only to the normal, upstanding members of society. That's not mission work. That's just being a Pharisee.

The thing is, we all fit under the category of “sinners.” In the eyes of God, none of us would fit into the category of “the good people.” We're sinners. We all have different sins in our lives, different weaknesses, different things we've said and done and thought, that are sinful. If only the good people were welcome in this church, none of us would be here! All of us have sinned, and have fallen short of the glory of God.

And yet, we can come to Jesus, again and again with our sins, and our Savior forgives us. He welcomes us. He offers us his body and blood in the Lord's Supper. He reminds us again and again that he has taken our sins away in the absolution. Jesus came into the world to save the sinful people, to welcome the sinful people, and to bring them comfort and joy.

Aren't you glad that our God is a missionary? How is it, that you became a Christian? God did mission work. For some of you, he used your parents, who brought you to the waters of holy baptism, and who brought you up in the Word. Christ was behind that! For some of you, God put people into your life who influenced you to find out more, to learn more, and as you did, God worked on you. God didn't wait for you to become perfect. Instead, he took you as you were, a sinful person, and he forgave you and welcomed you into his kingdom.

One of our members, I'll call him "Jim", was leading quite the sinful lifestyle. He had abused his wife in the past, and as a result she left him. He liked to drink. He did some cocaine on the side. One day, a previous pastor stopped at his house to speak with him, and he met me at the door and said to him, "What do you want?" He didn't like the pastor. And honestly, the pastor didn't consider him to be a very good prospect. But Christ is a missionary. Christ worked on him. For some reason, he started showing up in our church. He was baptized. And now, he is a key member of one of our congregations. He's not perfect, that's for sure. He is one of those lost sheep that Christ found, and the moment he believed, I'm sure there was great rejoicing among the angels in heaven.

You see, that's the purpose of the church. We're not an organization that's here for the perfect people, and we all get together and act churchy and think about how great we are, and then we all go home. The purpose of the church is to welcome sinners. We look for those lost sheep and those lost coins. And those lost sheep and lost coins are going to be sinful. They're going to be rude. They're not going to have any time for you. They're going to love money. They're going to have rough language. Maybe there's alcohol there, or drugs, or morality problems, or all that put together. They're going to say to you, "If I ever walk into your church, the roof would cave in." They're going to promise to see you on

Sunday, and then never show up. That’s who we’re here for, to look for them, and to welcome them. Do you know anyone like that? Those are the lost sheep. They belong to Christ. And he is sending you and me and everyone else out to look for them, and to welcome them.

May God bless you with a heart that loves and welcomes sinners, just as Christ loves and welcomes you. You all have people in your lives, that sinfully skip church and make excuses. That’s your mission field. And when that total stranger walks into your church, don’t shut the door on him. Treat him as you would want to be treated. What a wonderful God we have, who loves us and welcomes us. May we reflect that same love toward others. Amen.