

Out Exploring
Genesis 12:1-4 and Luke 5:27-32
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Genesis 12:1-4

Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’^{*}

4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Luke 5: 27-32

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. “Follow me,” Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”

Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

Sermon

Who's in and who's out?

That question follows us throughout our lives. Which teacher in elementary school, which crowd we run around with in high school. Which college we get into, then which fraternity and sorority at which college.

As adults it might be where we live—the right or wrong side of the tracks—or even of the street. When I lived in Central IL I had someone ask me which end of my street I lived on. Was I in, or was I out?

Studies show we unconsciously decide where to place someone based on their ethnicity, or age, or accent. What we drive, how we dress—it all comes into play.

Who's in, and who's out?

Of course this question isn't new. It came up quite often in Jesus' day, too. And it does in our New Testament passage from the Gospel of Luke. In this passage we hear about Jesus' interaction with three groups of people: the tax collectors, the "sinners," and the Pharisees.

To figure out who's in and who's out in whose eyes, I want to tell you a little bit more about each of these groups.

First, the tax collectors. They're Jews who collected taxes on behalf of the Romans. And they normally charged people extra, and then pocketed the remainder. It would be like us the Skyway tollbooth operator figuring out how to get Ipass to charge each car \$20 instead of \$5, and pocketing the difference. Good way to get despised. They were treasonous. Total outcasts within society. Not "in." Totally "out."

Then the "sinners." I like the New Internal Version's translation because it actually puts quotes around the word. That's to remind us that everyone's a

sinner, but this group were those who had broken the religious laws. They were unclean, so they couldn't go into the synagogue. They are quite literally "out." They're just as outcast as the tax collectors.

Then we have the Pharisees—the religious leaders who fastidiously try to follow all of the religious laws.

This week as I studied I learned some new things about them. They're not the two-dimensional villains that we often make them out to be. They are really committed to getting close to God—and they think they know the best way to do that: by nitpicking about all of those religious laws.

They're also convinced that the best way to get better at picking nits is to hang out with other nitpickers to reinforce their values. Then their kids can grow up picking nits together, and they can all follow all the laws together, and they can all grow up to be religious leaders together. The families that pick nits together are all "in" together.

So the Pharisees want to separate themselves off from other people who don't pick nits as closely as they do. After all, hanging out with people who aren't worrying about the law is not going to make them better at following it. It will make them worse! So they draw a circle around themselves, and say, "we're in; you're out." And they separate themselves from everyone else to get closer to God.

Let's recap. The tax collectors and the "sinners"? Outsiders. The Pharisees? Insiders, who aren't looking that far out.

They're not looking too far out, that is, until Jesus comes along. First thing Jesus does is call a tax collector to be his disciple. WHAT? What is Jesus doing calling an outcast tax collector to be his disciple?!?!?!

And then the next thing they know, that tax collector is throwing a great banquet in Jesus' honor. And the place is FILLED with outcasts. Not just tax collectors but "sinners," too!

The Pharisees know they're on the inside and the others are on the outside, and they simply can't believe it. So they ask Jesus' disciples what's going on. "Why in the world would Jesus be spending all of his time over there, with all of those rejects?" They don't exactly say it, but they might have: "Especially when he could be over here with the 'in' crowd?"

Now, before you get all worked up about the Pharisees, I want to tell you what someone said at the Wednesday Women's Bible study to get us all thinking that they weren't two-dimensional villains. I was telling them about the Pharisees and how they like to hang out with people who reinforce their values, and how they think they know the best way to get close to God, and how they want to separate themselves off from people different from them, and she said,

"You know, I'd make an awfully good Pharisee. I like to be with people who have the same values as me...like all of you in this Bible Study. And I've been working my whole life to find the best way to get close to God. And coming to church here in Lake Forest does seem to separate me from people very different from me...So yeah, I'd be a pretty good Pharisee."

There's never very much silence in that Bible study, but there was after she said that.

It reminded me of a friend who once told me that every time we see the word *Pharisee* in the Bible we should substitute *Presbyterian*.

If we try that for a second, we'd put ourselves in Luke's story and hear that the Presbyterians were questioning why Jesus ate and drank with the tax collectors and the "sinners."

Like the Pharisees, we'd be looking at the tight circle around us and wondering what Jesus is doing out there? Why isn't he here in the circle with us? With people who are "in" like us?

If we just slowed down long enough to notice what Jesus was up to, we'd see that he was out exploring. Out exploring outside of the circle. Outside of the people so certain that we were on the inside. He was out exploring, finding the people who don't fit in. Outside, at a great banquet for the tax collectors and the "sinners" and for him. That's where Jesus was—out exploring.

That's where Jesus was in the story. But where would Jesus be today?

It's made me wonder. If Jesus were alive, in the flesh, in 2018, and had one Sunday morning to spend in Lake Forest—would he come to worship here?

I think he would love being here. He would be so glad to meet all of you! I think he'd like the music. I think he'd love the children's time and would encourage us as we continue to pray about our next pastor coming. He'd think Nancy did the announcements particularly well and that the preaching was adequate, though he'd give me some tips for next time around.

I do think he would love it if he came here...but to be honest, if he only had one morning to spend in Lake Forest, I don't think he'd come here. I think he'd be out exploring. I think he'd be out looking for the despised, the ignored, the unnoticed, the outcast, because I don't think he'd find very many people like that here.

He'd be out exploring, because Jesus has a different idea about what makes a faithful disciple from what the Pharisees do. The Pharisees think that separating themselves from people who are not like them is the best way to be a faithful disciple.

But Jesus is out exploring, because he thinks that discipleship is not about separation, but about connection. Connecting with our neighbors. REALLY connecting with them—getting to know them, so that we can care for them. And Jesus would say that connecting with our neighbors who are not much like us—that's really the goal.

One commentator that I read put it like this:

The stubborn stuff of history demands that we wrestle with the brute fact that Jesus called the outcast, the despised, and the hated. He did not move through Galilean society, handpicking the most religious, most virtuous, or most popular to follow him. He built his movement from the castoffs of society.

--Allan Culpepper, *New Interpreters Biblical Commentary: Luke*, p. 127.

That's why Jesus would be out exploring on a Sunday morning here in Lake Forest. He'd be looking for the outcast and forgotten. The ones who were never at the right school or who never lived on the right side of the track or whose skin was never the right color or whose car was never the right model. Jesus would be out exploring, looking to start relationships with them so that they would feel valuable and loved.

If Jesus were out exploring life with the outcasts, why wouldn't we be too?

That's the challenge that I have for you this week. Think about who it is in Lake Forest and Lake Bluff and the community that you live in who is outcast, unnoticed, or ignored. Then go out exploring what it means to develop a relationship with them, so you can understand their life better and learn from them.

To be honest, I'm not sure who the outcasts are in the communities where we live. I haven't even been here three months yet, so I've asked around:

- some people tell me that the people of color who often do the landscaping and housework are like outcasts—often when they get hired their day employers don't even bother to ask their names.
- Others tell me that the people who live here who have less financial means than average are often looked down upon.
- Someone told me the physically disabled here are “definitely” outcast here.
- Another person hinted she didn't know what would happen if a lot of Muslims moved into our communities.

I don't know who might be outcast or despised here on the North Shore. You know the people here so much better than I do. I don't know who's looked down upon and I don't know who's ignored.

But I do know that Jesus is a lot more likely to be out exploring relationships with them than he is to be squeezing in to a narrowly defined circle.

And I do know that on our good days, we'd be out there exploring with him.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.