

Luke 15: 1-12

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them.

1 Timothy 1:12-17

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Take Your Faith and Share It

Rev. Charles Schuster

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Evangelism is a word we don't use much around here. In fact, we once had an evangelism committee, but we changed the name of the committee to Membership and Communications. It's not only this congregation. The last church I was in we had an evangelism committee, but we couldn't get anybody to be on it, so we changed the name to the Connection Commission. We don't do much to bring people to the church here. Once upon a time we'd send church members out with a bag of cookies to track down any visitors that might come, after they had attended worship. Often, we would interrupt a football game and some of us sort of got into just leaving the cookies at the door, pushing the doorbell and running. The cookies would melt, or draw ants. We just don't get too excited about our faith. We're a little like the Lutherans down the street, but we'd be lethargic Lutherans, if we were Lutherans. Or if we were Presbyterians we'd never be the ones that won the shoe. We never raise our hands in church because it calls attention to ourselves, and if we raise our hands too high God might call on us, and that's dangerous. Don't expect us to go door-to-door, we'll leave that to the people with the *Watchtower* magazine, the Jehovah's Witnesses. If some of us were Jehovah's Witnesses, we'd be like Flip Wilson said – we'd be Jehovah's Bystanders. Let the Mormons get on their bicycles and ride around our

neighborhoods, but don't ask us to do it. I wouldn't do it. It's not something we do with our faith. We take our faith and keep it to ourselves, because, see, it's a private matter, and we're respectable in our faith, modest with our testimonials, apologetic with our evangelism.

This morning I want to speak with you about faith, our faith, and I'd want to say we need not be ashamed of our faith, we need not be embarrassed by it. What is our faith, and what do we have that someone else might need? We take our faith and we share it. But first of all, what is the source of it, what is our inspiration? Our inspiration is Jesus, and we certainly don't need to apologize for that. We don't need to be embarrassed to admit it. We're Christian. But we have to get to the essence of it, because we'd be first, I think some of us would be first to admit that some of what goes on in the name of Jesus isn't right, at least for us. The writer of First Timothy got to the essence of it when he wrote that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst." The reference there was that as if Paul had written First Timothy, which Paul didn't, but it was so well known that Paul was one who persecuted Christians, that that story got told and told, and it made sense to the people who heard it. The writer of Luke had the essence of it when he recalled how Jesus said that there's more joy in heaven when one lost soul is found than when ninety-nine just people come forward. Ninety-nine just people come forward who have no need to repent. The essence of our faith, the inspiration we find in Jesus, we don't need to apologize for that.

James Moore has a story that gives you the essence of the Christian faith in reverse. It's a traffic light, it's red, and there's a car in front and a car behind, two cars, and the light's red. The light turns green. The first car doesn't move. The guy in the second car begins to honk his horn and yell obscenities and provocative gestures until the first car moves forward. Then there appears a police car, patrol car. Pulls the guy over, gets him out of the car, handcuffs him, puts him in the patrol car, calls back to the station on his radio. Comes back to the car, gets him out of the handcuffs, tells him he's free to leave. The motorist asks him, "What was that all about? Why was it you arrested me? Why was it you let me go?" The officer told him, "When I saw the bumper sticker on your car, that read "Honk if you love Jesus" and I saw how you were acting, I was pretty sure you had stolen the car."

When we act in a way that is not Christian, it's glaring and obvious. Behavior that isn't Christlike is easy to see. And so is behavior that is, that conforms with the Christ we claim to worship. We know it when we see it. If we put the inspiration of the Christian faith on the bumper sticker of our car, it would say, "This is the truth for us. How Jesus taught us to love one another, how he lived his life for others, how he was Godlike, and if we know Jesus, we know God. For us God is love and forgiveness and unconditional love. That's what our faith and our ministry together's all about." We don't have to hear the name of Jesus to know what Christlike is. We don't have to convert other people to our way of thinking to recognize unconditional love being demonstrated in a person's way of living. Jesus is our inspiration. He was present to Paul and he forgave him. He was present to any who had fallen from God and had turned their back. Jesus is our inspiration, there's no need to be ashamed about that. He is prototypical of what it means to live fully. He's the inspiration that calls us to give ourselves in service. We're given the inspiration of a man who acted not in self-interest at all, but on the basis of a radical sense of inclusion, looking at the margins of society. "To the least of these," he said. We give ourselves to this. All of us have. And if we ask ourselves how we are to live in this world, all we have to do is

to think of the man who was hammered at the cross, and what he did. For he was not put to his death because he did violence to anybody. He was killed because he refused to believe as he was told. He thought in broader terms, beyond the borders of his own faith and he inspires us to do the same.

It comes down to this – God was for him unconditional love. God was a forgiving presence, a joyous power. Jesus died hoping this example of his would save us to be able to trust that God would be with us in death, in dying, in life with all its complexities and problems. That is something we want to talk about, something the world needs to hear. That's our inspiration. It tells us that forgiveness is not just a one-time thing, it's a lifestyle. It's how we are to live, and it includes love for our friends and love for our neighbors and love for the strangers we see as we come and go, and love for the enemy. It suggests that when we are offended, we don't need to turn the tables on them, that all we need to do is to turn the other cheek toward them. That inspiration is what the world needs. That inspiration is what the world needs. It'll end poverty. It'll end war. It'll temper hatred. Our inspiration is Jesus. We're Christian. No need to withhold it. In fact I would say, in our world with the collision and the warring of world religions today, the best thing, the most important thing that Christians could be in our day is to be Christian. That means to be forgiving and loving and compassionate and caring and hoping and working to build a better world just like he did. Jesus is our inspiration.

Methodist is our denomination. Organized religion is not popular these days. Denominationalism is not attractive. Some churches even deny they're part of a denomination, even if they are. They are. Some churches go together and say, "We're not part of a denomination. We're non-denominational. Oh, yeah, we're part of an association." It's the same thing. Organized religion. Somebody would say, "I've got a problem with organized religion." We would say, "Well, you'll love us, we've been trying to get organized for over two hundred years." I guess we are part of organized religion as Methodists. We are. We don't need to be ashamed of that. William Bausch talks about the couple that are walking out of church one Sunday, and she says to him, "Did you see that strange outfit Mrs. O'Brien was wearing today?" and he said, "I didn't see it." She said, "Did you notice all those children in the pew in front of us, how poorly behaved they were?" "No, I didn't see that." "Did you see the preacher? Preacher needs to get a haircut. I sure hope he gets a haircut before we get into the finance campaign because pledges are going to be down if he doesn't." "No, I really didn't notice the preacher's hair." "Honestly, John," she said. "Sometimes I wonder if you get anything out of church at all when you come." Now, therein, I think, is the problem with organized religion, more concerned about form than content. More worried about things on the surface than things that are deep and important.

Our denomination is Methodist. Bill Grove, he solved the problem for us. "Our church finds itself," he said, "in a difficult situation, attempting to make its witness in a culture that is secular and materialistic and violent." But I believe that our denomination is one of the best at doing it. We can make our witness, because our approach to theology, because our approach to life and to people in life, is open doors, open minds, open hearts. The Methodist church is one of the Christian denominations that is proud to be connected, and is prepared to use the connection to break through the barriers that divide people. That's who we are. The Methodist church does not judge or condemn or belittle people of other faith traditions, because it is convinced that all of us fall short and can find room to improve. The Methodist church believes in the grace of God and

the good in life, and the Methodist denomination holds in balance the importance of what is called scriptural holiness and social justice, the piety of faith and the prophetic word in action. “The Methodists alone do not insist on your holding this opinion or that, but we think and let think,” John Wesley said. “Neither do we impose any particular mode of worship. I don’t know any other religious society, ancient or modern, wherein such liberty of conscience is allowed. Herein is our glory,” Wesley said, “Herein is our glory.” Methodists do not impose a creed, nor do we judge people who have one. Leonard Sweet said it. He said, “We are not concerned whether your experience of God has the intensity of a flashlight or a floodlight. For each person, it’ll be a different candlepower. Our only concern is that it be a genuine experience, and an experience of God that is growing.”

Will Willimon is a bishop in the church now. He was the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University a few years ago. He asked himself a question, I’m guessing one day on the way home. He asked himself a question, “Why am I a United Methodist?” The result was a book. Will Willimon does not have an unpublished thought. In this book he tells us why he’s a United Methodist. He said, “It’s because our religion is from the heart. It’s because for us the Bible is primary. It’s because our religion is practical, because our worship is central, and because we have a social conscience. And mostly, because we are expected to grow in our faith.” Marjorie Suchocki, she’s the president of Wesley Theological Seminary, she was not always a Methodist. She explains why she made the decision to join the United Methodist Church. She said, “In the Methodist church I felt I was coming home. Coming home is not a process of arriving. But for me, it was a process of joining a band of pilgrim people who were continuing on their journey.”

We don’t need to apologize if we’re Methodists. It simply means that we’re searching seriously and haven’t found. It means that we’re moving forward, but we don’t always know toward what. That we have been graced by God, and we are positive and hopeful for the future and grateful for the past. We believe that this is the day that God has made, but that our best days are in our future. As we have passed another one of those anniversaries of that awful day in September 2001, we realize the importance of the message we have. For a world like this, that is so secular, so materialistic, so violent, and sometimes so frightening, there are times when we feel God’s absence more than we feel God’s presence. There are times when the curtain drops and the light seems to go out and the hope seems to dim. And there are times when the primary attitude is despair, and our first thought is revenge, and underlying that is fear that God is walking out on us. That’s the very time when people need to stand up for tomorrow and speak out for God. Prevenient grace of God that loves us just because we are, that’s all. Or the justifying grace of God that loves us when we fail and encourages us to try again. Or the sanctifying grace of God that calls us to move toward perfection, because if we’re not moving toward perfection, what are we moving toward?

We don’t need to be embarrassed to be Methodists. We just need to hold onto that which is the essence of our denomination, the best part, which is enthusiasm and curiosity, Biblically sound, theologically searching. Our inspiration is Jesus, but our denomination is Methodist, and our institution is First Church, this place. Let’s look at First Church. Lovett Weems was the president of Saint Paul’s Theological Seminary in Kansas City. Some time ago, he had spent some time in London, and he heard about this story of a priest in London who had made the decision that he wanted to work with the least well-paid of the workers in London, the street sweepers. So he

took off his clerical collar and he worked with the street sweepers. No one knew he was a priest. John was older, and therefore slower. He didn't always get done everything that had to be done every day, but the other street sweepers liked him so much because he listened to them, that they would fill in. The thing he didn't get done one day, they would come in and help him. When there was a grievance, when there was a problem, a trouble over wages or working conditions, John would listen and then go talk to the powers that be, and he seemed to be able to make a difference. One day a group of street sweepers came to him and said, "John, we got a problem. Joe died. Joe, we found out, lived in a little shack in the alley there. We didn't know that he didn't have a place to live. If we'd have known that, we could have done something about him. We didn't know he was sick, we could have helped him if we'd known. There's nothing we can do for Joe." John looked at him and said, "Maybe you can. Maybe there's one thing you can do for Joe. Maybe we can put on a funeral for Joe." That's when he revealed for the first time that he was a priest. And so a funeral was held. Street sweepers from all over London came. John, dressed as a priest, presided. And when that service was over, before anyone could get up, one of the street sweepers who sat at the front stood up and addressed the sea of other street sweepers as he looked, and said to the others, "How many more priests are there here?"

I'm the senior pastor of this institution. How many more pastors are there here? My job is to see to it that your passions get permission to be expressed at this institution. Before I got here, the decision was made to renovate the sanctuary, and for the first two and a half years of my time here, my job was to get out of your way and let it happen, and take you all on tour so you could see the progress being made. It was the passion of the people. Some thought we ought to keep alive the idea of an alternative worship service. Sunday Night Alive gave way to Crosswalk, and it's happening again at 12:15. Stay around. Every Sunday at 12:15, a contemporary alternative service, it's the passion of the people. We have classrooms for children that are fun learning environments, interactive rotational Sunday School. One of the looks like a movie theater. One of the looks like a puppet stage. One of the looks like a kitchen, a café. One of them looks like a computer room, it's got a bunch of computers in it. One of them's a music room, one of them's an art room, one of them's a science room. Those children love it. This morning at the Children's Sermon we voted on what their favorite was, and guess what? Their favorite room was the movie room, where you get popcorn every Sunday. That's what we did so our children would love coming to Sunday School, and they do. Why did we do it? Because it's the passion of the people. We built the South Entrance. If you come in from the south entrance, it's got an elevator in it, and pretty soon we're going to install one of these chair lifts, and when we do, we will have finished out promise, completed it, to make our building as best we can, completely accessible to a person with handicapping conditions. Why do we do that? It's the passion of the people.

For years, it's been considered that we ought to do something here at the church to defray the high cost of burial, and do something to honor our deceased loved ones, and soon we'll be building a Columbarium. And why are we doing that? Because it's the passion of the people. We ought to be a church where college students can attend. Some of us have thought that, and some people have worked really hard to be a presence on the campus, and let the students there know that here's our church and they can come, and they're coming here. We even thought about reinstituting something we had a long time ago, the Wesley Foundation. And you look around our church now, boy, they're here. They're singing in the choir, and doesn't the choir sound better because they are. And they're in our Sunday School classes, and they're working with our

youth, and they're working in our church school classes. Why are we doing that? Because it's the passion of the people.

A man said to me after his wife died, he said, "Is there some way we could – you know, we could have some kind of group of people get together and talk about what it is to try to get through something awful like I've had, the death of my wife." What was formed was the Grief Support Group, meets every Tuesday afternoon at 4:00. Why? Because it's the passion of the people. Senior Council thought we ought to be able to pick up people who want to come to worship but they don't have a way to get here, so we retrofitted one van and then bought a second van that has a chair lift. Why are we doing it? Because of the passion of the people. "Why can't we work with other Methodists," somebody said, "and form a group that goes out on mission trips?" and so LAMP was formed. LAMP was formed, and the group from Guatemala is leaving this Friday. We honored them and commissioned them in the 9:15 service, because of the passion of the people. Why are there just two Methodist churches in this town, about a mile apart? That's crazy. There needs to be another Methodist church in the area. We've been trying to work on this for a number of years. We tried and failed. We're going to try again, in Wellington, as you heard. Why are we doing that? It's the passion of the people, that's why. We need a full-time youth minister. We had a part-time student, Jennie Olsen did a great job, but she was part-time and a student at CSU. We need a full-time youth minister and now we have Reverend Kershaw appointed to us full-time. We need a full-time woman minister to stand up to the male clergy on the staff and what have we got? We got Pam Everhart, and believe me, she does it. We had a good music program until Colleen left, till I introduced her to the person she married and they moved to Iowa. I'm an idiot. But have you heard the choir now? Incredibly, they're better. And that's because of the passion of the people.

We had a few classes for adults, selected at random and selected without any particular plan, and now we have a whole approach to adult classes called Learning For Life. Over a hundred classes planned for the next year. You'll see a thousand people coming to the classes. It's the passion of the people, and you're going to see it. "Why can't we have more fun around here," somebody said, "like a chili cook-off or a basketball tournament, or a garden tour, or an all-church picnic?" Well, it's the passion of the people, and we're doing it, and we've done it. Why can't we have women's ministry Sunday and bring in one of the best preachers in the whole Methodist church, so we can hear this person, Janet Forbes? You're going to hear Janet Forbes. She's one of the best in the whole denomination. She's here and will be here on the last Sunday in September. It's because of the passion of the people that we're doing that. The UMW and the committee on the role and status of women are working together. The thing that's impressive is, I've hit about a third of the things that I could talk about. So if your group or your thing is not something that I mentioned, two thirds of it I haven't even mentioned. That's the thing that's impressive – there's so much more. It's all about the passion of the people, the passion of the people here at this church, this institution. I'm the senior pastor here, but this isn't my church, it's your church. My job is not to push my agenda, but to help you articulate your vision and then to activate your passion and then to get out of your way.

Kim Millard came here about a year and a half ago from Indianapolis and told us the best way to be a church is to encourage, not discourage, ministry. He says the best thing to do is don't sit there and talk it to death about ministry in meetings, but take some chances, and life itself will

tell you whether, in time, if it will work or if it won't. And he warned us, we just must never find the reason because we have lack of money, to prevent ministry. Do it anyway. Try it. He said our best hope is to let our passion for ministry drive our church, and the only question we really need to be asking is, "What does God need us to do?" and "What does God need us to do now and here?" This is First Church. It's driven by the passion of the people and by pastors whose primary gift is to get out of your way and let it happen. It's First Church. We are known for what we do, appreciated for how we do it, and valued for who we have become. We are not blatant with our faith, we are polite. We are not exclusive with our faith, we are open, but we are very close to something we know that is very valuable to us. It's the inspiration of Jesus. The denomination of Methodist. Our institution is driven by our passion, and people are watching us. They are watching what we do, they're hearing what we say. They're observing who we are. We may not think, in this church, that we are evangelistic. But we are. We do take our faith, and we share it, even when we're not sure how or why.