

DODGING THE THRUST

Jesus was the companion of sinners. Companion? Yes. We get our word “Companion” from the Latin words, “com” that means with, and “panis” that means food. A companion is someone you eat with. Jesus was the companion of sinners.

Who were these sinners? We’d have a difficult time picking these sinners out as we must heed Paul’s reminder to the Romans in chapter 3:23. “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” But the Pharisees had no such problem. For them it was simple: a sinner was any person who did not observe the details of the orthodox law. Jesus wanted sinners to know God. The Pharisees didn’t. They didn’t seek them- they shunned them. They even had a name for them. They called them “the People of the land.”

It would be easy today to dodge the thrust of this gospel. The first dodge might be this: we could talk about sheep and shepherds; about coins and the floor of Palestinian homes. There would be several interesting things to say.

For example: the shepherd was responsible for the sheep. If a sheep was lost, the shepherd must at least bring home the fleece to show how it had died. The shepherds were experts at tracking and could follow the footprints of a straying sheep a long way. It was often part of the day’s work for a shepherd to risk his life for the sheep. A straying sheep could lose its landmarks and bleat helplessly at the edge of a cliff.

Another example: it would be easy to lose a coin in most Palestinian homes of that day. Most of the houses were dark. The floors were beaten earth covered with dried reeds and rushes. It was easy to lose a coin. Perhaps it was necessary for the woman to find it out of economic necessity; or perhaps because it was one of ten silver coins linked together by a chain that formed the necklace of the headdress of a married woman, something like our wedding ring today.

Jesus is not talking primarily about sheep and coins. He’s talking about persons who need the Lord. That we can’t dodge.

A second dodge might be to take comfort in the percentages of the story. For the shepherd, one sheep out of a flock of one hundred was a one per cent loss. That’s not so bad, but it’s no use telling that to the shepherd. He leaves the ninety-nine and seeks the one until he finds it, as though it were the only sheep that mattered. Each one had a place in his care. There is joy in his heart when he finds it.

For the woman, it was one coin out of ten, a ten- percent loss. Yet how can a wife joyfully wear the headdress with one coin missing? She seeks the coin as though it were the only one that mattered. Each coin had a place in the bridal strand. There is joy in her heart when she finds it.

Or we might take comfort in the percentages of the statistics of the church. From twelve disciples it has grown to millions of members. Or consider the percentage of people in the church in relation to other things. For example, there are more people in church on any given Sunday, than at all the professional football games for a whole year.

But can we honestly talk about percentages to the Jesus who told about the shepherd and the housewife and about the joy in heaven over one sinner that repents? Jesus is not talking about percentages, but about persons who don't know the Lord. We can't dodge that.

A third dodge might be to talk about people, to point the finger of scorn, like the Pharisees did. For example we could talk about some of our neighbors. My goodness! The way they talk, the things they do and the way they live their lives!

There was a woman who lived in a small town that often went shopping in the big city some distance away. She assured her children that she couldn't get lost. She had certain landmarks. She always knew the way home, and how close to home she was. Then they put in the new highway. She said, "Now I never know quite where I am, or how close I am to home. I've lost my landmarks."

Perhaps those neighbors, like that woman and like some sheep, have lost their landmarks too. Oh yes, we could talk about people, and point the finger of scorn, like the Pharisees did. We could talk about people, and point the finger of scorn; but Jesus was not talking about people, but rather about persons, and that's different. He was not talking about coins, but a single coin; not about sheep, but about one sheep, and in each case it was found by a person who cared. We can't dodge that.

The thrust of this gospel is aimed right at us. It is a pointed question: do we care about persons who do not know the Lord? There's not much use in telling them they are lost. They may not know it, like the coin, or may not realize it like the sheep. If we told those neighbors they were lost they might laugh at us, or give us a smart remark. They might tell us to mind our own business or tell us they are just as good as we are.

Do we care enough to exhibit the Christian life as best we can, with persistent acts of caring and kindness? Do we care enough to tell them what Jesus means to us, and could mean to them? Do we care enough to let them laugh, and give us a smart answer, to let them tell us to mind our own

business and remind us of our own shortcomings? At least they will know someone cares. Cares about them the way Jesus did.

Through our caring, the Holy Spirit may do his work. The knowledge and the memory that someone cared may be like a grain of sand in an oyster, which will grow into a pearl. The results are in God's hands, not ours, if we have done what we could. If we have not cared, if we have not done what we could, then, as Ezekiel puts it, "Their blood is on us."

A pastor friend of mine tells this story. "While visiting in the hospital I met a little nine year old girl who was a patient. I thought I recognized her name, so I asked her if she was the little girl who went to our Sunday school. She replied, 'No, Sir. I don't go anywhere to Sunday school.'

I told her who I was and said, 'while I'm here perhaps we could have a prayer.' She replied, 'that would be fine, but I don't know any prayers.' Nine years old! I said, 'what I meant was that I would offer a prayer for you.' She replied, 'that would be fine. No one has ever prayed for me before.' Nine years old!

Of course, I followed up on that little girl. In the house on one side of her home lived a family who were members of a major Christian denomination. In the house on the other side lived a family who were members of another denomination, and two families of my own church lived in the same block." That little girl also lives in Clarence, Mo. And perhaps she lives in your block, no matter where you live, and the Jesus who told about the sheep and the coin asks us, "DO YOU CARE?"

How can we be complacent about our Christian faith as long as we know persons who have wandered away from the Lord? The church has all kinds of programs, workshops, and literature about evangelism; but it isn't much good without the essential ingredient- someone who cares that a person does not know the Lord. The sheep was not scolded, the coin not cursed- they were sought after by someone who cared. Forget the statistics. Most of us know someone who doesn't know the Lord. DO WE CARE?

This Gospel is not simply aimed at the Pharisees. It is aimed at us; and the thrust of its message is this: DO YOU CARE? It's no use trying to dodge it. It doesn't matter who they are, where they are or how they got lost. We have one message, to be expressed in quiet words and in compassionate kindness. JESUS CARES ABOUT YOU. Who on God's green earth is going to tell them if we Christians don't?