



**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School**  
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**Third Sunday of Advent**

**December 16, 2018**

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**“How to Ruin Your Reputation”**

*(Luke 7:34)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“Jesus said, ‘The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” (Lk. 7:34).*

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...  
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

**Collect:** Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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You can't tell a book by its cover. It's a lesson we have to learn over and over again.

Heading north out of town last summer, I needed to fill up at the BP on Highway 16. It was a nice day, I had the windows down. I was listening to WPR on the radio and they began playing a beautiful Mozart bassoon concerto. I cranked up the volume and was enjoying it. Pulling into the BP there was just one other vehicle there, a guy filling up his rusty old utility van which was resting a little off kilter. He looked a little like his van, as if he had lived a hard scrabble life. I turned the radio off, not wanting to invite his indignation by blasting a bassoon concerto at him. He finished fueling, hopped into his van and turned the key. His radio came on and had also been cranked up . . . to the same bassoon concerto! And he didn't bother turning the volume down!

You cannot tell a book by its cover. That certainly doesn't stop us from trying. I think it has something to do with making life simpler for us. Our brains are bombarded by so much data that we cannot possibly sift through it all. So we try to simplify things by clustering people into categories. I had subconsciously plugged this fellow into one such category. Among other things, I assumed if this guy was listening to anything on his radio it would be country or maybe rock, but not a bassoon concerto.

We do the same thing with race, and with age, religion, and with gender, subconsciously making lots of assumptions about how this person votes, where they probably live and work and shop and play. Clustering people together on the basis of appearances certainly makes life simpler for us, but it's by no means fair or just or accurate.

One time, early in the ministry of Jesus, the Pharisees were trying to figure out just who this Jesus is. He's not fitting into any of their usual categories or clusters. He's the

son of a carpenter, and yet clearly, he's very intelligent and articulate. He wasn't educated in any of their prestigious rabbinical schools, and yet he seems to know the Scriptures inside and out. He's of humble origins, and yet absolutely at ease among the wealthy and powerful. At times, he seems so pious and zealous, for example when he fasted 40 days and nights in the desert. But then he also ignores their Sabbath laws, as if he doesn't know them or care about them. So they're not sure what to make of Jesus. He doesn't fit into any of their categories or clusters.

There's a saying, "Show me your friends, and I will tell you who you are." It means who you choose to keep near you tells me a lot about your personality, your character. Birds of a feather flock together. But with whom is Jesus flocking? Tax collectors and sinners!

At last, the Pharisees have him figured out. This tells them all they really need to know about Jesus. He can say what he wants; he can go on teaching with his golden tongue; he can do another 40 day fast in the wilderness, but the proof is right before their eyes. Here he is, once again, eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. The first time, maybe it was an exception, a circumstantial accident. But it's no longer an exception. It's become the rule.

The sinners and tax collectors are certainly enjoying his company, and he seems to be enjoying theirs. Can you picture it? There's vigorous conversation, some laughter, lots of wine and food on the table. There's mutual respect all around the table, affection even. They've accepted him into their little circle of ill repute, and he seems glad to be part of it, like he belongs there, like they are his people, his clan. What more does anyone need to see? Finally, they've got him nailed down, all clean, neat and tidy. Finally he fits well into one of their categories. He's a "glutton and a drunkard; a friend of tax collectors and sinners." That's his new reputation, and it sticks to him like tar, at least with some.

You have a reputation. It precedes you and it follows you, for better or worse. Your reputation is formed early and lasts long, and once broken, it is hard to mend. In a place

like Watertown your best chance might be moving elsewhere. But before you do I think it's helpful to keep in mind there's a difference between reputation and character. Reputation is what people think of you. Character, in contrast, is what God knows of you. God looks at the heart. People can't do that, so they look where they can, at the color of your skin, your age, the kind of vehicle you drive, the house you live in, the people with whom you choose to spend time. That's the stuff with which we make judgments all the time. It's the visible tip of the iceberg, the character of which is well below the surface.

Once you've gained a negative reputation, it's hard to shake it, mostly because in our minds we won't let people grow out of their reputations. One of the guys I knew back in the UW band was a big time partier, hard drinking, loud, funny, reckless, (a tuba player of course; which tells you all you really need to know about his personality. That's irony). He knew my brothers, and so when I first met him, standing behind me in the stands at a football game, he looked at me and shouted, "You're a Groth!" He laughed out loud and took my head in his hands and kissed the top of my head. I haven't seen him in 35 years, but that's still how I think of him: the loud, partying tuba player with a big personality. My brother Andy has stayed in touch with him and tells me today he has a very prestigious job at the university. He's buttoned down, polished, poised. God help me, I can't picture it. I see him as he was, and can hardly imagine him as he is. I haven't allowed him to crawl out of the pigeon hole into which I had plugged him 35 years ago.

Likewise Jesus has earned for himself a reputation. To the Pharisees, for now at least, he's a boozier with a big appetite, and they're not going to let any new information sway them. Other categories will come later (such as an insurrectionist), but this, for now, is their working view of him.

Others have a completely different view of Jesus. Just before our text is the account of him doing a big miracle. Jesus came across that funeral procession, that of a young

man, on a bier, carried aloft by mourners and pallbearers. Jesus interrupted the procession, touched the bier and says, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” And the young man sat up and began to speak. The crowd was awed and said, “God has visited his people”. So this crowd thinks there’s something of the divine in him, while the Pharisees think there’s too much wine in him.

Then comes our text, in which even John the Baptist can’t quite figure Jesus out. John, of course, was a fire and brimstone kind of guy, and often used images of judgment to describe the work of the Messiah, for example saying “every tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Mt. 3:10ff). But Jesus doesn’t seem to be living up to John’s expectations. He’s too soft on sinners. Therefore John sends some messengers to Jesus, “Are you the one [the long-awaited Messiah], or shall we look for another.” Jesus answers in the affirmative by pointing to the Old Testament messianic prophecies: “Go and tell John the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised . . .”

So different groups are plugging Jesus into different categories. One more example: immediately after our text, comes the account of the sinful woman anointing his feet with the alabaster flask of ointment. In it a woman of the streets, a woman of low repute crashes the party, washes his feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, anoints them with precious ointment, and Jesus, for his part, just sits there and takes it in. We all know this is pretty intimate stuff, playing with his feet, weeping, washing, anointing . . . it’s all very tactile. It’s not a metaphor, she’s all over him . . . at least all over his feet. It’s a scandal of the first order and it raises additional questions. Where did she get the precious ointment? What did she do to get the money to pay for it? Maybe it’s best not to ask.

John the Baptist wouldn’t have been caught dead in the company of this woman, but Jesus doesn’t shrink from her. He has everything to lose: his rising credentials as a prophet; his moral purity, his reputation. But he doesn’t care

about all that, doesn't put any value on reputation at all. After all, he doesn't rebuke the woman. Of all people, he rebukes Simon, his prestigious host. See how easily Jesus ruins his reputation?

We care so much about what others think of us. We would rather die than lose a good reputation. We know the quotes. "It takes many good deeds to build a reputation and only one bad one to lose it." Here's another: "You can't buy a reputation. You have to earn it." We care a lot about our reputations. We know that just about any company can go belly up. But if you have a good reputation, someone out there will want what you have to offer. Jesus, however, doesn't care about his reputation. One glance at his friends will tell you the same.

Simultaneously, Jesus is making for himself some pretty formidable enemies. Show me your friends and I'll tell you who you are. Show me your enemies and I'll tell you who you are. Jesus now has enemies among the most respected religious authorities in the land. And they would succeed; they would pull some levers and see him crucified. If you really want to ruin your enemy and his reputation, it doesn't get any better than putting him on a cross. (Crucifixion was the most shameful way to die, reserved only for the worst criminals.)

So they called him "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." If you don't get anything else from this sermon, please hear this. Jesus is "Friend of sinners, and tax collectors and gluttons and drunkards." That means in Jesus' fallen circle of friends, there's probably room for you and for me. If he had love for the likes of them, he has love for you. If he's on the cross for them, he's on the cross for you. If his blood is in the cup for them, for their forgiveness, it's in the cup for you.

Does he care about your sin? Well he certainly didn't choose to ignore it, did he? He addressed it head on, at great expense to himself! Apparently he knows something about our sin and its wages that we prefer not to think about. But that's why he's on the cross, ultimately not because of

his enemies, but because of yours: sin, death and the devil. That's why he's on the cross, to cleanse you of any sin and any reputational tar that might be sticking to you. With his forgiveness, he allows you to grow out of a ruined reputation. In baptism he daily and richly gives you a clean start. Let others think about you as they will; you can't change that. It's God's judgment that matters, and thankfully, he won't change that. He doesn't look at your reputations. He doesn't even look at your character. For you and for your salvation, he chooses to look at Christ and his righteousness and innocence, and imputes that to you, gives it over, ascribes it to you as if it really belonged to you all long.

We care a lot about our reputations. We believe a good reputation is a terrible thing to lose, and we know a tarnished reputation is a difficult thing to change. But Jesus doesn't care about reputations, neither his nor yours. After all, consider who his friends were: sinners and tax collectors. They are his kind of people, his clan. He doesn't avoid us, doesn't shrink from us. It seems he accepts us, loves us even . . . all the way to the cross, and for that we praise God loudly and joyfully. Amen.

