

“SINNERS, OUTCASTS, AND THE POOR”
By Rom A. Pegram (4/7/19 – 5th Sunday of Lent)

‘Any country music fans here? If so, I have a question for you: *Do you know what Garth Brooks and Jesus have in common?* Have you ever heard the song “Friends in Low Places?” [*Listen to it at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myCgSqPZ4EM>*] Every time I hear that song ... I think of Jesus! What do you think?

Folks, Jesus was one who often broke bread with the rich and poor alike! He ate with the ‘righteous’ and he ate with the ‘sinners!’ But, their reactions toward him were often quite different; *the righteous were often offended by what Jesus had to say ... while the sinners were drawn to him in multitudes!* What does that tell you about Jesus? And what do we need to do if we’re serious about ‘walking in the footsteps of Jesus?’ JESUS HAD ‘FRIENDS IN LOW PLACES!’ Perhaps, we should, too! Just listen to our Bible story for today (John 4:3-10, NLT)...

So he left Judea and returned to Galilee. ⁴ He had to go through Samaria on the way. ⁵ Eventually he came to the Samaritan village of Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob’s well was there; and Jesus, tired from the long walk, sat wearily beside the well about noontime. ⁷ Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Please give me a drink.” ⁸ He was alone at the time because his disciples had gone into the village to buy some food. ⁹ The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, “You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?” ¹⁰ Jesus replied, “If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water.”

Just to remind you why we’re in this series for Lent, the Apostle John explains it in this way (1 John 2:6, NLT): “Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.” So that’s what we’re learning to do together, as we soon approach Easter 2019...

Before we get into the specific ways of Jesus today—talking about his ‘friends in low places,’ let’s first begin with a Hebrew lesson. There’s a Hebrew phrase *am ha-aretz*, which was often used in Jesus’ time to indicate outsiders of one kind or another. The word literally means ‘people of the land,’ with its origins as far back as the time Israel conquered Canaan and some of the ‘am ha-aretz’ (people of the land) remained in the land after it was conquered—people like the Philistines and other Canaanites (a derogatory term, for sure)... Eventually, in Jesus’ day, it came to mean ‘foreigners’ as well as the unintelligent or unschooled, the uncouth, unclean, or otherwise second-class in some way. It especially included the non-religious or nominally religious folks of Jesus’ day—those who did not strictly adhere to the Law...

Folks, in today’s scripture, it’s the *am ha-aretz* that Jesus is connecting with. These were the people with whom Jesus spent a great deal of time...

- He healed their sick...

- He fed their hungry...
- He was constantly in their midst—touching the untouchable...
- Very simply, *he was interested in those the world put down...*

So, as we continue to learn to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, we're going to look at the three categories of *am ha-aretz*: the sinners, the outcasts, and the poor. The big question for today—one the disciples wrestled with too—is: *Who did Jesus really love?*

JESUS LOVED THE SINNERS. Let me give you a couple examples today: The first example is one who became a disciple of Jesus (Matthew 9:9-13). Not long after Jesus called his first disciples (Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John—all fisherman), Jesus called a man—like Simon Peter—who also went by two names: Levi and Matthew. He stopped by the tax booth in Capernaum and called one of the greatest sinners to be his disciple! Can you believe it?

Matthew's tax booth was stationed on a Roman road, where he collected taxes for exports out of Capernaum such as fish or olive oil or other items produced there ... for the Romans. He was a Jew from Capernaum; he'd grown up in the faith but had turned his back on the faith for the sake of 'money.' He'd had to bid on the right to hold the tax concession for that spot; he paid a flat sum to Rome in advance, then kept whatever he could collect—usually an amount way over what he'd paid Rome! Sweet deal, huh?

The fact, however, that tax collectors worked for Rome (the occupier of the day) was, in itself, enough to make these guys *traitors* in the eyes of their own people! *They weren't welcome in the synagogues ... and upstanding Jews wouldn't associate with them...*

It was this person—a *sinner in the first degree*—that Jesus walked up to and said, "Matthew, I want you to follow me." And just as surprisingly, Matthew looked at Jesus and said ... 'yes.' Here was a man who was probably making a great deal of money at the time ... and he simply shut down his tax booth (for which he'd probably already paid a year's rent) and set off to follow Jesus...

In looking for a present-day analogy to what just happened here, it'd be like your pastor—needing someone with a business background for leadership at the church—going to the nearest strip club and hiring the owner as an associate pastor! *Wouldn't that be shocking?* That's kind of what Jesus did. He loved sinners ... and undoubtedly saw kingdom potential. The point is: *Jesus didn't see Matthew as 2nd class!* Could we see through eyes like that? ... And that night, Matthew threw a huge dinner party, and invited all of his *am ha-aretz* friends ... and Jesus broke bread with them!

The second example of Jesus loving sinners ... comes from a story in Luke 7, where Jesus went to eat supper with a Pharisee. Jesus, apparently, loved to eat! He was invited one day to have supper at the home of a Pharisee named Simon. If you remember this story, when Jesus arrived for dinner—supposedly as an honored guest, Jesus wasn't given the traditional welcome an honored guest would be given—a foot-washing, a kiss of greeting, and anointing his head with oil...

Basically, Simon purposefully insulted Jesus that day. And then, during the dinner, something absolutely shocking happened. A woman, known to the host to be a local prostitute, walked into his home looking for Jesus. When she saw him, she fell at his feet and began to weep. *Simon was outraged, and no doubt embarrassed.* He must have been thinking, "How dare she show up at my house and spoil my dinner party!" And he says as much ... and tries to belittle Jesus. Then, Jesus tells a parable which clearly shows Simon why she's there (Luke 7:44-47, NIV): "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven--for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." Simon was clearly guilty of *loving Jesus little* that day...

Does Simon even really see this woman? 'Of course he did! Unfortunately, folks, the longer we're Christians, the greater the temptation to become like the Pharisees. The sins I struggle with, as time passes by, are not the huge ones ... but the more subtle ones that have to do with *matters of the heart*. *But, are we willing to walk in the footsteps of Jesus—even if it means loving sinners?* The first group of *am ha-aretz* were the sinners and Jesus loved them; the second group he loved, too...

JESUS WELCOMED THE OUTCASTS. Let me give you a couple examples here as well: These were the unclean or untouchable of the day—people like the lepers—those who had physical/mental illnesses that no one wanted to get next to. Another group were 'the outcasts' who—for whatever reason (i.e. prejudice, etc.)—society just hadn't accepted...

One of these *am ha-aretz* that society in Jesus day had not accepted were those called ... Samaritans. The woman at the well (today's Bible Story) was a Samaritan. Samaritans were considered by Jews to be half-breeds—stemming from 8 centuries before when the Assyrians conquered and scattered the Jews all over the world, leaving some. Those that were left inter-married with other *am ha-aretz* (people of the land). Then, even though they still practiced many of the Jewish ways, pure Jews rejected them as *outcasts*—totally avoiding this area of the land called Samaria ... but, Jesus didn't!

Jesus *chose* to go through Samaria. He ended up at 'Jacob's Well' at noon—when the place should have been deserted (in the heat). However, one woman showed up—a sinner and outcast, a Samaritan and a woman of loose morals; she came at noon—most likely—to avoid others ... and their comments!

Jews didn't even speak to Samaritans, *but Jesus did*. Jews didn't come near Samaria, *but Jesus did*. He visited with this woman, letting her know he was the Messiah ... and she could have the *Living Water* he offers ... just like the Jews! Jesus, folks, loved the sinners and the outcasts ... and his life showed it!

This woman went back to her village and told everyone about Jesus ... and he stayed there 2 more days. *This sinner and outcast became the first missionary to the Samaritans!* Not only did she come to know the Lord of LOVE, but she helped others to

do the same! Jesus loved both sinners and outcasts, along with the final group of *am ha-aretz*... Folks,

JESUS CARED FOR THE POOR. Every time Jesus met with those who were better off—financially and socially, he encouraged them to *always care for the poor*...

I can't help but think of the text Jesus chose for his first sermon in Nazareth—from Isaiah—that reads: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” This was a theme in Jesus life; *he loved the POOR*...

Three of Jesus' parables were meant to help us understand how to see and minister to the POOR...

- The Good Samaritan (Luke 10)...
- The Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25)...
- And the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16)...

If you were to study these three parables, you'd find that unequivocally ... JESUS CARED FOR THE POOR!

Folks, the book of James tells us that, “Faith without works is dead.” *OUR FAITH IS MEANT TO MANIFEST ITSELF IN A CONCERN FOR THE AM-HA-ARETZ*—the sinners, the outcasts, and the poor! Jesus cared for all of these. Let me remind you: JESUS HAD FRIENDS IN LOW PLACES! And followers of Jesus befriend the *am ha-aretz*, the people of the land...

- They love sinners...
- They welcome outcasts...
- They care for the poor...

This is the way Jesus lived, and it's the way we live ... when we walk in the footsteps of Jesus...