**Pastor’s Message “Hope For the Lost”**

For weeks before my first day of middle school, I had nightmares. Not nasty horror movie nightmares, but instead, nightmares about getting lost trying to find my classes.

See, I had heard from my friends, and neighbors on the school bus, just how difficult it was to navigate the old middle school with its confusing layout after additions were put onto the building. I liken those nightmares to going through a corn maze, hitting one dead end after another with mounting frustrations. (And by the way, don’t ever take me to a corn maze, because I will walk around for a few minutes and then call it quits and start walking in any given direction through the corn stalks until I can get OUT of there!) I DON’T like to be lost and I will find my way back to where I need to be eventually…

Anyways, getting back to Middle School… I was terribly worried about being late for every class and having to serve detention from receiving too many tardies. Unfortunately, the only advice my older brother could give me was, “DO NOT ask an upper-classman for directions! They’ll act like they’re helping you and send you in the wrong direction!” Ugh… Is there no hope for the lost? (I quickly learned to ask  teachers for directions when I needed help.)

Have you ever been lost? It’s not fun, is it? It can cause frustration, fear or anxiety, which apparently in me… leads to nightmares. (Like the middle school years aren’t difficult enough…)

Luckily, it didn’t take me long to figure out how the school was laid out and those nightmares ended just in time for me to start having new nightmares about missing the school bus or arriving at school in my jammies!

Just to make me feel better, by a show of hands, have any of you had similar dreams? Thank you for your honesty.

But getting back to being lost, of course we know there are different ways of being lost. Many people today feel lost because they can't find work in the specialty they went to school for. Others feel lost because they want to start a family but don't think they can afford to. I've gotta tell ya, it's not easy in today's economy.

There are also those who feel lost because they don't know where to turn when they're faced with questions about the weight of their sins. Like the sinners and tax collectors in our reading from the book of Luke.

But before we get into that reading any further, have you ever wondered why tax collectors are listed separately from the other sinners? Does that mean they’re considered to be worse than a “regular” sinner?

From my own personal experience, I can tell you that when we lived in Sheboygan some 27 years ago, we befriended a couple from church whose names were Jim and Vicky. They were wonderful people. And (gasp) Jim was an IRS employee, and he honestly didn’t seem like any worse of a sinner than me!

So, let’s take a little look into why the New Testament differentiates between "tax collectors and sinners"... They are frequently mentioned together in the context of Jesus' ministry. Both groups were considered social outcasts and were often despised by both Jewish religious leaders and the general population.

The tax collectors referred to in scripture were Jewish individuals employed by the Roman authorities to collect taxes from their fellow Jews, so they were “working for the enemy”. Tax collectors were notorious for their corruption and greed, often collecting more than required and pocketing the excess. This practice made them wealthy but also made them despised by their fellow Jews.

The term "sinners" in the New Testament often refers to those who lived outside the strict observance of the Mosaic Law. This group included individuals engaged in various immoral activities, such as prostitution, as well as those who were ritually unclean or marginalized by society. The Pharisees and other religious leaders considered themselves righteous and often looked down upon these individuals.

Despite their social status, Jesus frequently interacted with tax collectors and sinners, demonstrating His message of redemption and grace. Jesus knows that forgiveness is attainable by everyone. Every one of us is capable of having a change of heart that brings us around to no longer fight the truth of not only God’s existence, but also the truth of God’s welcoming grace that erases our sins and draws us nearer to God.

In Psalm 14, King David says, “*Fools say in their hearts, “There is no God*.” These are the lost that Jesus refers to in our Gospel reading today. The sinners and tax collectors Jesus was associating with were considered by the Pharisees and scribes to be fools as they had no regard for anyone else and paid no mind to the hurt they caused to others or to their relationship with God.

But when they encountered Jesus - the embodiment of God here on earth - they were convicted of their sins and eager to rid themselves of the impurity of those sins. They felt a deep hunger to change their ways and make things right between them and God so they may abide in his presence (as I refer again to Psalm 14, where we are told that, “God is with the company of the righteous”.)

The interesting thing about righteousness is:  We couldn’t be righteous without forgiveness through the blood of Christ. Therefore… in order to be in the company of God, we need God to know that our hearts are convicted and renewed through our confession of and rejection of our sins.

So, let’s give the angels a reason to celebrate! There is hope for the lost because we have found the way through the maze so many are lost in.  It’s like we have the map and God wants us to share the map with everyone who can’t find their way. We are the hope for the lost as we direct them to salvation through Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God and Amen.