When was the last time that you were welcomed? It might have been when you were invited over to someone’s house for dinner. They opened the door to their home and said, “Welcome!” and gave you a hug. They had a smile on their faces and really appreciated you coming over to their home for dinner. Maybe, it was this morning. The pastor or greeters had smiles on their faces, shook your hands and were glad to see you. Or perhaps it was simply a little sign in a flower bed outside a friend’s house or a professionally made sign outside of a business.

“Welcome” is a word we usually love to hear and experience. For example, think of the joy that soldiers feel when they return from a long deployment and the words “Welcome Home!” are emblazoned on banners and posters held up by their loved ones. While you may not have had that experience, being welcomed does give you a sense of joy and acceptance.

It should be no surprise, then, that the same thing happens when we welcome others. When you welcome someone, you express how much that person means to you as a loved one, a friend, a fellow believer, even a customer. Out of love or hospitality or kindness, we often spare no effort to give a warm welcome.

Yet when it comes to sharing the good news of Jesus, do we always welcome everyone? It’s much easier to share Jesus with someone we know or love or who is like us, but if it’s someone we don’t like or don’t know or isn’t like us, sharing Jesus can seem much harder. Usually if we can avoid it, we do. Yet how quickly we forget that even though God had every right to avoid us, JESUS still WELCOMES SINNERS! And So Should We! May we all have the attitude: Lost People Matter to Me!

Have you ever felt unwelcome at a church? When non-WELS visitors come to our churches for the first time, they probably feel more awkward than we really know. What’s going to happen in this church service? I don’t really know anyone here. This is a bit scary. Or if the guests come from a trailer park down the road. They look at this beautiful church, the late model cars in the parking lot, and think, this looks like a rich people’s church. They get the courage to stay for fellowship after church, and are sitting at a table all by themselves. Meanwhile you are at the table you usually sit at talking to friends? Are you welcoming them, or possibly shutting them out? In Jesus’ day, a lot of people were being shut out of church. The Pharisees were the religious leaders, and they were in charge of the synagogues. That’s where they had their church services, where they read God’s Word and sung the psalms.

But certain people were not welcome there. Tax collectors – not welcome. They ripped people off. Sinners – people with immoral lifestyles – not welcome. Only the good people, the upstanding members of society, the moral, pious, “normal” people – only they were welcomed at the synagogues. But the Pharisees saw that Jesus treated the tax collectors and the sinners differently. In verses 1 and 2 we are told that the Pharisees were saying to themselves, “This man Jesus welcomes sinners and tax collectors, and he even eats with them.” “Why is he doing that?” they probably wondered.

Jesus knew what they were thinking, and so he went on to tell them two short parables. The first is the parable of the lost sheep. There’s a hundred of them, and one of them gets lost. What does the shepherd do? He goes and searches for that lost sheep. And when he finds it, he puts it on his shoulders, takes it home, and throws a big celebration. The same things happen with a woman who loses a silver coin. She lights her lamp, sweeps out her whole house until she finds that one lost coin. And when she finds it, she
gathers her friends and neighbors and celebrates. Jesus’ main point with these stories is this. Every single soul matters. Note the emphasis on one. One out of 100 sheep. One out of ten coins. Jesus wants his kingdom extended to everyone. Lost people, no matter what their background, matter to Jesus. Lost people should matter to me as well. Jesus welcomes sinners. Everyone is precious.

Note too the persistence of the shepherd and the woman in our lesson. It reminds me of when I lose my wallet or glasses. I go through every room again and again. I keep searching until I find that wallet or pair of glasses. Jesus wants us to have that attitude toward the lost. Never give up on them. Keep looking for ways to reach them. Never give up on them until they are dead. A relentless search for the lost.

Sometimes we’re like those Pharisees, aren’t we? We’re selective with who we would like to come into our church. If you’re a good person, if you have your act together, then come on in. But if you have problems, if you’re struggling with some different sins in your life, we would rather that you stay away. Only the good people who have their act together are welcome. Not the sinners. WE all have sinful natures that make us think that way sometimes. Let’s do mission work, we say, but only to the normal, upstanding members of society. In reality, that’s not mission work. That’s just being a Pharisee.

The thing is, we all fit under the category of “sinners.” In the eyes of God, none of us would fit into the category of “the good people.” We’re sinners. We all have different sins in our lives, different weaknesses, different things we’ve said and done and thought, that are sinful. If only the good people were welcome in this church, none of us would be here! All of us have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God. We were all lost.

Like the shepherd and the woman, Jesus spared no effort to find us. We were so hopelessly lost it took everything on his part to rescue us. He had to leave the comforts of heaven to search through this corrupt world. He had to face the roadblocks and dangers of temptation. He fearlessly slogged through the muck and filth of this world to find souls. That search even took him to the darkest ends of society.

Finally that search led Jesus to a barren hilltop where he endured the worst, most difficult part of the search. There he sacrificed everything to rescue lost sheep like you and me, but when he stepped out of the tomb alive on Easter, Jesus proclaimed to the world that his search was successful!

Because Jesus spares no effort, we spare no effort to find the lost and bring them the rescuing news of the Savior. We spare no effort to share the Savior with people so he can take those lost sheep on his gracious and almighty shoulders. We spare no effort to reach those who may differ from us in personality or gender or race or social status or family background.

But there are barriers out there that keep us from going home to our friends and family to tell them how much the Lord has done for us. The first barrier out there is the failure to appreciate the treasure of salvation. When you have been given the same thing over and over again, it’s easy to take it for granted. You know how that works. A child receives a new toy. At first the toy is special. He wants to share it with his friends. But after a while the toy is thrown into the toy chest, hardly to be used again. And so it is that if I don't appreciate what I have, I am not going to give it to someone else. Do we really appreciate the treasure of salvation we have been given by Jesus Christ? Do we know
what it means to be called out of darkness into God's wonderful light? It’s time for us to recognize again just what we have been given by Jesus.

Another barrier to sharing the promise is our failure to really accept the lostness of the lost. When I do evangelism visits in the community it ceases to amaze me that everyone out there thinks they are going to heaven. But they haven't the foggiest idea of how it will really happen. There is a dangerous universalism which has crept into our society. But my friend, the Bible is clear, "He that believeth not shall be damned. I don't care how nice a person your unchurched friend might be, if he doesn't believe in Jesus as his Savior, he will be lost to an eternity in hell. Yes, it’s vitally important that we accept the lostness of the lost. For it is only then that we will want to build relationships with the unchurched so that we can have the opportunity to share Christ with them.

Sometimes we hear people say, "I don't feel at ease talking to strangers about religion. I might mess up, thus it’s better that I do and say nothing. But my friend, how could you make it worse for an unbeliever who is already on the path to hell? Listen to the comfort the prophet Isaiah gives us. He tells us that no matter how bumbling we might be, The Word we share will have an effect on our hearer. Isaiah 55:11 says, "so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." So in God's eyes you never really mess up if you share the simple testimony of the Word. Sometimes people say, I can't witness because I wouldn't know what to say. Jesus' disciples felt the same way. They were just uneducated fishermen. How could they speak about Christ in a court setting? Jesus tells them in Matthew 10:19, 20, "But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."

And you know, sharing the promise brings joy. In fact, it brings a triple joy. First, there is joy in heaven. In Luke 15:10 it says, "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Yes, the angels in heaven are clapping when you share the promise. Secondly, there is joy on the part of the hearer of the good news. Think of the story in Scripture of the jailer of Philippi. What did he feel like after Paul and Silas told him about Jesus? We are told that he went home rejoicing and told his family of what he had seen and heard. And finally, there is joy on the part of the witness. No drug can give you a greater high than sharing the promise of Jesus Christ with someone, and then seeing that Word take root in their lives.

Jesus welcomes sinners! The Pharisees thought they were ridiculing Christ, but what they said was true! In fact, are there any more beautiful words? Jesus welcomes sinners! That means Jesus welcomes you and me! That clear fact brings confidence to your heart, comfort to your soul, and joy to your lips. You can now look forward to the grandest of welcomes in the glories of heaven where the Good Shepherd with open arms will tell you and every rescued sinner, “Welcome home!” Amen.