Ash Wednesday
February 16, 1983

"FOR SINNERS ESPECIALLY"

Luke 5:29-35

Do you know what got Jesus into trouble more than anything else? He practiced what he preached! He not only talked about God's love for all people, he accepted, became friends with, and loved individuals who were unloved and rejected by most of the religious people of his time. To put it another way, as Jesus went about his ministry, he attracted sinners of all kinds. These were individuals who lacked self-esteem, who felt unworthy and unloved. Jesus was not afraid to be seen in their company, even though he knew he would be criticized for it.

Look at what happened in this story just read from Luke's gospel. The Pharisees were objecting to Jesus' actions, not his words. They found him eating with sinners. They, like us, could stand a good deal of verbal teaching. There are always many teachers among us. They didn't mind his talking about love and the fact that God loves all people, even those we reject and hate, but to act out that teaching, that's another matter. It's all right to talk about love in theory and in general, but to get specific and do something about it, that they couldn't take. Actions can bring trouble. That's true in most aspects of our life together.

We're all for peace, but get specific and begin doing something about it, and the disagreements begin. We're all for justice in general, but justice is a meaningless generality until we put it into practice in a particular time and place. Then we may not all agree as to what justice is. We're all for loving one's fellow human beings, even the outcasts, the rejected, but then get specific as Jesus did and not only say it, but do it. So a black family or an Indian family or a homosexual moves into our neighborhood, and then acting out the love we say we believe in takes on a new meaning, and it's more difficult than we thought. Then we begin to realize that deep down all of us tend to be exclusive in one way or another. We want to divide people into two groups -- those that are OK and those who are not OK.

The problem is that we go on to assume that God doesn't love those people that we find difficult to love and accept.

But God's love is stronger than ours and more inclusive than ours. God's love for the world and for individual people became very specific and active in the person of Jesus Christ. God's love became flesh and dwelt among us. And Jesus made it very specific in his actions. He said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but the sinners to repentance." And that's what he did.

We in the church who call ourselves Christians are to practice what we preach, just as Jesus did. Thus the church is to be open to all, to welcome all. We are to be inclusive, not exclusive. The church is for sinners especially!

This story from Luke's Gospel is, above all, a story about the grace of God. We do not earn God's love and acceptance by our goodness, nor does anyone. We are all sinners in one way or another, but we are still invited to the Lord's table, to God's banquet. And to this same table, Christ invites others that we might want to reject. This church is open to all who want to come and find and accept God's love. Amen.