

“Part of the Gang”

Isn't it nice being part of the gang? That's probably why I enjoy the Peanuts Comic Strip characters so much. They all seem to be happy when they are together. Of course - much of their time is spent trying to be accepted by the others in the gang. Lucy is trying to get Schroeder's attention while he's playing Beethoven on the piano. Charlie Brown is constantly trying to get noticed by that little red-headed girl. Even the little bird, Woodstock is trying to gain the attention of Snoopy the beagle. Being a Part of the Gang. It makes us feel good.

Now, although it was a bit before my time, some of you may remember seeing “The Little Rascals” also known as “Our Gang”. I remember my “Older Sister” watching them as well as seeing them shown before the main Saturday afternoon Double Feature for 25 cents. Spanky - Buckwheat - Darla - Alfalfa singing out of tune - and Petey the Dog. Throughout their 87 episodes they would get in trouble together and have fun together. But the one thing that always won the sympathy of the audience was when one of the characters was shunned from The Gang. Maybe they didn't share, or they had a disagreement. But we were always waiting for that moment of forgiveness and acceptance; the time when they were welcomed back into the Gang. Belonging feels good! We like it when we are with people who know our favorite things, our likes and dislikes, and they accept us just as we are.

The sign on the door said “Puppies for sale” and so the little boy went inside to look. The man inside the pet shop showed him 5 puppies that were ready now to leave their mother. They were about the cutest dogs the little boy had ever seen. “How much are they?” the little boy asked. The man replied, “Some are fifty dollars, some are more.” The little boy reached into his pocket and pulled out some change. After counting it, he said, “I have a dollar and forty-seven cents.” “Well, I'm afraid I can't sell you one of these puppies for a dollar and forty-seven cents, little boy. You'll have to save your money and come back next time we have more puppies for sale.”

About that time, the pet store owner's wife brought out another puppy that had been hidden in the back of the store. It was smaller than the other puppies, and had a bad leg. It couldn't stand up very well, and when it tried to walk, it limped very badly. “What's wrong with that puppy?” asked the little boy. The pet store owner explained that the veterinarian had examined the puppy and had discovered it didn't have a hip socket. It would always limp and always be lame. “Oh, I wish I had the money to buy that puppy!” exclaimed the little boy with excitement. “That's the puppy I would choose!” “Well, that puppy is not for sale, son. But if you really want him, I'll just give him to you. No charge.”

But the little boy got upset at this. He looked straight at the pet store owner and said, “No, I don’t want you to give him to me. That little dog is worth every bit as much as the other dogs you have for sale. I’ll give you a dollar and forty-seven cents now, and I’ll give you fifty cents a month until I have paid for this dog in full.”

The pet store owner was confused. “You don’t really want to spend your money on this little dog, son. He is never going to be able to run and play with you like the other puppies.” Then the little boy reached down and rolled up his pant leg to reveal a badly twisted, crippled left leg, supported by a big metal brace. He looked up at the pet store owner and said, “Mister, I don’t run and play too good myself. I figure this little puppy is going to need someone like me who understands him.”

We all want someone who understands us. We all want to feel accepted. There may be times when you feel like an outcast. You may think nobody likes you, that nobody wants you. You may be suffering, going through difficult times. Through all of that, you can be sure that Jesus understands. He knows exactly how we feel. Most of the time in his ministry, he didn’t feel accepted. Remembering this helped me when I was growing up.

A few weeks ago, when the lesson was about anything good coming out of Nazareth, I mentioned that I grew up in Kensington. I would like to have been a “part of the gang.” Now you have to understand that these were not violent gangs like you hear about now. It was just a group of local kids who hung around together. I would like to have been a “part of the gang,” but that didn’t usually happen.

Now I knew all the kids in the gang in my neighborhood. But they never really included me in their group. I would hear about the Birthday Party that was held, but I wasn’t invited. But every now and then there was a mother who knew me and did include me on the guest list. But the entire time I was at the party, it was uncomfortable because I knew my “friends” didn’t want me there.

You see, in Kensington it wasn’t cool to get good grades. I got all “A’s” with an occasional “B” - not cool among gang. Then they would call me up on stage at the Awards Ceremonies to give me meritorious awards. Couldn’t they just slip them to me in home room? In Kensington, it wasn’t cool to be held up for being “good”. My musical abilities didn’t help either. I played the Trumpet in Concert band, the piano in Jazz Band, and I was the Drum Major in Marching Band. It was definitely not cool to be a band geek. let alone be Drum Major. Yes, it would have been nice to be a part of the gang. But my friends never included me in the activities they did together. They were cool - I wasn’t.

But it was interesting how they would relate to me when they were not in the gang. David was going to be kicked off of the football team if he didn’t pass Geometry. So when he asked if I would help him with his Geometry Homework and not tell anyone else in The Gang -

I just smiled and said, "Sure". Ken knew I had a car, he didn't, plus he had to work in his father's business after school. He asked me if I would be willing to drive his girlfriend to the Planned Parenthood office so she could have a pregnancy test? (This was way before the home pregnancy tests.) When Gordon was admitted to the Drug Rehab unit he was told he could have one friend visit. His mother said he would like to talk with me. The Gang knew I was a church organist and went to Church even without my parents dragging me there. Maybe that is why, when Tim's mother died suddenly, he came to talk to me with his questions about Heaven and Eternal Life. What I came to realize was, that although I was not *in* the Gang, I was part *of* the Gang. I wasn't cool enough to be *IN* the gang, but on an individual level I knew I was a part *OF* the gang.

This is similar to what the Apostle Paul was experiencing. Paul was not in the various gangs of his day, but he knew that in order to be able to have them hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ he would need to become part of their gang. That is what he is trying to explain in today's lesson from 1st Corinthians. In other words, Paul was saying, "I will do anything, I will go anywhere, I will pay any price, I will endure any costs; I will make any sacrifice to win anyone at any time that I can to Jesus Christ, as long as it doesn't compromise biblical principles or the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Six times in this passage Paul talks about winning others to Christ. V.19 "...that I might win the more." V.20a "...that I might win Jews." V.20b "...that I might win those who are under the law." V.21 "...that I might win those who are without law." V.22a "...that I might win the weak." V.22b "...that I might by all means save some." Now don't get the impression that Paul was a people pleaser, because he was anything but that. He said in Gal. 1:10, "For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a servant of Christ." Paul would have never said "To the thief, I'll become like a thief." Or, "To the adulterer, I'll become like the adulterer." Or, "To the drunkard, I'll become like the drunkard." The message was non-negotiable. He says earlier in this chapter, "For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do *not* preach the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16) But the method was flexible.

Every church ought to have a "whatever it takes attitude." But be careful before you say it, because when you say it - you had better mean it. We need to have a "whatever it takes" attitude to reach the next generation; to reach the homosexual; to reach minorities; to reach teenagers; to reach millionaires; to reach the bums. We have to be willing to do whatever it takes to make all people a part of the gang we call Christians.

Part of that is in getting to know one another better. People we are less involved with know more about us than those we worship with every week. The Grocery Store Clerk knows you always buy extra soda and snacks on Wednesdays because that's when you kid's bring their friends home. The local UPS delivery drivers know what kinds of packages you get, and from where. The kid at the video store knows your tastes in movies. Your postal carrier can probably

tell what your hobbies are by the magazines you receive, and when your birthday is based on the cards they deliver. And the Gang you belong to, your Christian Brothers and Sisters, don't know as much as these casual acquaintances. I also wonder if those casual acquaintances, the Grocery Store Clerk, the UPS Driver, your Postal Carrier - do they know you're part of a gang? This Christian Gang? If their mother died, would they feel comfortable asking you to pray for them? If they were entering Rehab would they ask for your support? Even if they're not in our Gang, we need to work to make them a part OF our Gang.

As the Apostle Paul tells us: "...and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law." (v.20) Paul was a Jew. But he was not just an ordinary Jew, he was a new Jew. He was a free Jew. He was no longer under the law, he was under love. His life was under new management. He no longer had a legalistic relationship to God; he had a loving relationship to God. Where others today chant "I want my rights" Paul said, "I am willing to give up my rights for what is right."

Today we are happy to observe Boy Scout Sunday by having members of our Troop 12 participate in worship. They work hard to make boys feel a part of their Gang. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America wants to be welcoming to all people and have them become a part of their gang. And yet both these groups are wrestling with whether or not to accept those who happen to be homosexual. The Apostle Paul is telling us that we do not have to be an alcoholic to welcome the alcoholic. We do not have to be a Drug Addict to welcome those who are Drug Addicts. We do not have to be poor to welcome the poor. We do not have to be Gay or Lesbian in order to welcome those who are. We do not have to have been a prisoner to be able to welcome those who were. We do not have to be homeless in order to welcome those who are homeless.

It is the same system that I grew up with. Those who are on the outside, those who feel marginalized and unaccepted, whether it be the Scouts - the Church - the School - or the Government - or just your group of friends - they don't really care what the National Organization or Regional Organization's policy says. They simply want to know if *you* will let them become a part of the gang.

How can we be a part of the Gang of followers of Jesus Christ and *not* welcome them? How can we say our mission is to share the life, love and joy of Jesus Christ with others? We don't have to be like them - we simply have to be more like *Jesus*. And Jesus was willing to do whatever it takes! Amen