

Calling All Sinners

Mark 2:13-17

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¹³ Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. ¹⁴ As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

¹⁵ While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

¹⁷ On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Sermon, "Calling All Sinners"

Candice and I don't travel as much as we'd like to, but when we do, we try to experience as much as we can about whatever city we're visiting.

A few years ago, we visited Philadelphia and took a walking tour of the historic district with a guide who was wearing heavy woolen clothes such as would've been the style in 1776. It was July and he did not look comfortable as he taught while we walked and as we asked questions about the city.

This past April, we took another walking tour, that time through the historic district of Amelia Island, Florida. It was just the three of us: Candice, me, and the tour guide. But we had a wonderful, educational conversation about the island as our guide explained the history behind several buildings. Did you know that Amelia Island is known as the Isle of Eight Flags? It's the only location in the United States to make that claim. It was fascinating, and I wish I could remember just ten percent of what I learned that day.

I bring that up because that's how today's sermon text begins: Jesus and his disciples are walking along the road which ran from Damascus through Capernaum and on to the Mediterranean coast. All the while Jesus is teaching his disciples. Unfortunately, none of those followers preserved those teachings on parchment for our use and study today.

Somewhere along the route, they came upon what was essentially a toll booth operated by a man named Levi, a tax collector. There's a certain irony to being a tax collector in Israel back in Jesus' day. First, it was a coveted position because Levi was employed by Herod Antipas, the governor of Galilee. It was therefore a government job. On the other hand, tax collectors were despised by the Jews because they were viewed as traitors to Israel and because tax collectors had the reputation of being extortionists.

If you turn back to Mark chapter one, you'll discover that Jesus was in the process of putting together his team: he had already called Peter and Andrew and James and John. Eventually, he would call twelve to be his disciples, but at this point, so far as we can tell, there were only four who had committed to following Jesus—and they were all fishermen. They all had something in common with each other.

Imagine their shock when Jesus invites this tax collector to join them! *He's not one of us! He's not a fisherman! He's a tax collector! Nobody likes tax collectors and we don't like him!*

Of course, those sentiments by Peter, James, John and Andrew are not recorded in scripture. But what is recorded in scripture is the accusatory question asked by the Pharisees, only it's not directed at Jesus; it's directed at his disciples. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Jesus sees Levi sitting at his tax collector's booth and says, "Follow me." Notice Jesus doesn't say, "Believe me." Jesus always calls us to follow him. Jesus always calls us to action rather than to a prescribed set of beliefs. That's because beliefs follow actions. And Levi obeys. Much like the way James and John left their fishing nets to follow Jesus, so Levi leaves his lucrative government job collecting taxes in order to follow Jesus.

There was a difference, though, for Levi to follow Jesus versus what it meant for Peter, James, John and Andrew to follow Jesus. That's because they were fishermen and they would always be able to return to their boats and their nets. But not Levi. When he got up from that table, he was leaving a way of life that—despite all the hatred—was in many ways a livelihood that was coveted by others because of the opportunities it held for extortion and wealth.

When Levi got up from that table, he was quitting his job, never to return to it again. The same could not be said of the fishermen who followed Jesus, because after the resurrection, many of them went back to fishing. But Levi had no such option—and he knew it. Nonetheless, he got up from his collection kiosk to follow Jesus and forsake his old way of life.

So, we know what it meant for Levi to follow Jesus, but what does it mean for us today to follow Jesus? Much like it was for Levi: following Jesus requires actions, but those actions are as simple as walking, putting one foot in front of the other. It's something you do, and then you keep on doing it. So those simple actions include careful attention to the teacher, which happens when we read, study and meditate on the Word of God. We pray. We serve others. We worship together. And, as we see in the verses which follow, we eat together. As Christians, that often takes place around the communion table.

In today's Gospel story, Jesus, his disciples, and Levi all shared a meal together in Levi's home. Plus, there were many other sinners there. Most likely, this was a going-away party for Levi because he had decided to follow Jesus. So he invited his friends and neighbors to join him. And, as one might expect, his friends and neighbors were sinners just like him. But that made no difference to Jesus.

Over the past three days, Aledo hosted its Annual Rhubarb Festival.

Our church played an important role in that festival, by providing food and, yes, rhubarb pie out on the green space. One of the things I noticed is that when you got your food, you sat down wherever you could find an open seat. I sat down across from a couple of people that I knew, but next to some folks I had never met before. Or maybe it was the other way around! Either way, it didn't matter to us who we ate with, as long as we ate together as a community.

That sort of thing never happened in Jesus' day. No self-respecting Jew would ever eat with someone whom they deemed to be less than what they were. And no self-respecting Jews would ever eat with a sinner and certainly not a Gentile. What we did this past weekend out on the green space of our church would've been scandalous in Jesus' day.

That's because in Jesus' day, eating with someone was a sign of acceptance and intimacy. So when Jesus broke bread with Levi in his own home, it signified intimacy and acceptance. It was more than food; it was acceptance. It was Jesus saying to a traitor to Israel, "Let's have a meal together. I don't care if the world thinks you're a scoundrel; I accept you."

When the disciples were questioned about Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus interjected, "Healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do. I didn't come to call righteous people, but sinners" (CEB). That's one of the most profound statements spoken by Jesus that you'll ever hear. It is the mission of Jesus in a single sentence. Jesus did not come for the self-righteous, but for those who are alienated from the life of God. Jesus calls people to be saved from their sins, but in order to share in his salvation, you have to recognize your need for salvation. A self-righteous person is incapable of recognizing that need, but a sinner can.

This was really quite scandalous. The Pharisees believed that God saves sinners, but they would've insisted that you clean up your act first before you came to God. In other words, you had to stop being a sinner before God would accept you. But Jesus comes on the scene and accepts sinners as *sinners*. We come, "Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me. And that thou bidst me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come. I come." Jesus comes with a mission of grace and he comes to invite sinners to his grace. Thanks be to God!

Incidentally, this was not just any old Levi; this particular Levi was the son of Alphaeus. And those names are important for a couple of reasons. First, Levi was almost certainly the birth name given to the man working at that tax booth. However, the Matthew's Gospel tells the same story but gives a different name to the tax collector. There he is called Matthew, which means "gift of God." When Jesus called Levi to follow him; he also changed his name from Levi to Matthew. In the process, he changed someone who was despised as a tax collector into a "Gift of God." Christ gave Levi a new identity—his true identity as a Gift of God. And thanks to the Gospel which bears his name, he remains a Gift of God today.

Those whom Jesus calls, Jesus transforms. Jesus calls us, and in calling us, he changes us from what we were into a "gift of God." Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 5:17—

¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, [that person] is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

Those whom Jesus calls, Jesus transforms into new creations. Thanks be to God.