



GOOD SHEPHERD

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Hangin' with the Wrong Crowd

Mark 2:13-17; Luke 18:9-14

Sermon by: Robert Austell
September 29, 2019

A few weeks ago we had the most significant connection with our neighbors that I can remember in the last 10 years of being a church together. Do you know what I'm talking about? Anyone? [the Yard Sale] Yes, the Yard Sale. And the crazy thing is that we didn't really know that would happen. On the surface, it was a fund-raiser. We certainly wanted to do it well, do it right – be a good witness TO our neighbors and the community in the way we went about it. We made sure to reach out to neighbors immediately next to the church to let them know it would be going on. We reached out to the people across Swan's Run and said we would put up signs to keep people from parking in their yards or driveways. We hoped a few neighbors might take us up on selling their own stuff in the parking lot. Mark did a great job organizing and delegating all those tasks. And the morning of, he prayed with all of us volunteering that we would "be the face of Christ." But to use language from last week's sermon, I think he'd be the first to tell you that it turned into more than we could ask or think. And so, far more than being a successful fund-raiser, we had a number of significant connections with our neighbors. Mark shared some of the stories of those neighbor encounters last week in worship and there will be some more in the newsletter that comes out tomorrow.

Jesus talked a LOT about neighbors and being a good neighbor. In fact, I often describe us as a "neighborhood church." But it's hard to maintain that outward focus. It's easy to turn inward and lose sight of our mission and calling to the world. Today I want to lift up two reasons for that. And they are two reasons Jesus spoke and acted to overcome. We are continuing in our series called "Life in Jesus' Name." And if we are serious about following him – holding fast to his teaching and example – then we'll take on those two challenges to our mission and try to overcome them with God's help.

Look at the Mess! (Mark 2)

Here's the first challenge: faithful ministry and mission is messy. Yep; messy, loud, unexpected, full of new people, strange people, different looks and hues and backgrounds. And for a variety of reasons, for most of us, that is uncomfortable. Consider our first text this morning...

Jesus was in Capernaum – his home! – and was walking by the seashore. He had already called several fishermen to follow him. And he passed by the tax booth and saw Levi the tax collector. And as he had with the fishermen, he said, “Follow me!” And Levi got up and followed him. And this is when things started getting messy.

You may have heard about tax collectors in the first century A.D., or maybe not. The short story is that they were all crooks, or at least viewed that way. And they were universally hated by the common people. To start with, no one really likes paying taxes, and the Roman taxes were high. And if you didn't pay, a Roman soldier could come back and just take what he wanted. It was closer to collections by the mob than to what we know of taxes. And it was Jewish people literally working for “the man” and taxing their fellow Jews. But the real problem – and abuse – was that with the power of the army behind them, tax collectors were allowed and encouraged to add whatever amount over and above the Roman tax for their own personal use. It was completely arbitrary, abusive, and universally practiced in the Empire. It was also one of the most lucrative professions a person could have in the Roman Empire.

Knowing that much should tell you what a miracle it was for Levi to walk away from his tax booth and follow Jesus. The fishermen walked away from their boats and nets, and their livelihood, such as it was. Levi walked away from relative wealth and into a whole new life. Such was the power of Jesus to call people to follow him.

But there was more “mess” to come. Apparently Levi was so excited about Jesus that he wanted to tell all his friends... his tax collector friends... about Jesus and introduce them. So in the very next verse after Levi follows Jesus, we read that Jesus is at Levi's house at a dinner party packed with tax collectors and other “sinners”. Many of them had been following Jesus and they all gathered into Levi's house to eat and talk with Jesus.

And the scribes and Pharisees – the religious people – went crazy! These tax collectors were the unholyest, dirtiest, most unacceptable people they could imagine. The only thing worse were lepers, and of course, Jesus went around touching and healing them, too!

Jesus responded to their criticisms and questions with this (v. 17):

It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

Let that sink in. You know the idea of it, but let it sink all the way in. Jesus is like a doctor; the church is like a hospital. That implies a mission and a ministry that we often lose sight of. We are here as a church for sinners, for all who need to be restored to right relationship with God and forgiven of sin.

If we are doing ministry and mission right, this place will look more like a hospital emergency room or a raucous dinner party for the wrong kind of people or people climbing in through the roof than what we are used to thinking of as church. That's the kind of mess Jesus attracted. That's what holding fast to Jesus' name will look like.

Accurate Self-Diagnosis (Luke 18)

Here's the second challenge to our mission: it's an inaccurate understanding of our own situation. The sad irony lost on the scribes and Pharisees was that if they had recognized that they were sinners in need of God's mercy, they would have realized that Jesus came for them as well! But part of their practice of religion was a system by which they strived to be holy and righteous – and that naturally implied comparisons with those who did not strive for these things. Jesus' words were genius – simultaneously telling them that those who were truly “healthy” didn't need him (so if that's what they thought, then leave him alone!) and yet inviting them to come to him if they could see their own sin.

Remember the parable from our second reading this morning? While the loudly praying Pharisee did not, perhaps, engage in blatant and public sin, he demonstrated numerous sins of pride, judgment, and failed to recognize his need of God's mercy. On the other hand, the tax collector, surely guilty of blatant public sin, demonstrated true sorrow, repentance, humility, and was crying out to God for mercy. Who would God help and who, ultimately, would know God? ... For once Jesus answers the question. The sinner who humbled himself went home justified before God.

Perhaps the most helpful thing to prepare us for the messiness of following Jesus is an accurate understanding of our own spiritual condition. We are as desperately in need of God's love, help, and intervention as the messiest person we'll ever encounter “out there.” Let me say that again: You and I are as desperately in need of God's love, help,

and intervention as the messiest person we'll ever encounter "out there." If we can come to terms with that challenge to following and serving Jesus, then the other one becomes much easier. If I can come to terms with how much of a mess I am and God's expansive generosity in inviting and welcoming me into His house and presence, then I can hardly take issue with the tax collectors and lepers of the world. Because I am a tax collector and I am a leper.

Crazy Banquet

So what does that look like for us? I already have one answer for you; the Yard Sale. We thought it was one thing. And I believe because we were open to God's presence and direction, we experienced a bit of the glorious mess of life in Jesus' name. It wasn't mess in the sense of not getting things hauled away or running out of labels. It was mess in the sense of meeting tens, perhaps hundreds, of people we didn't know, of relating to them with kindness and hospitality, and experiencing many meaningful conversations and comments like "we'd like to meet again."

We have a number of neighbor events coming up. We will be having a BBQ, a kids movie night, a jazz concert, the Christmas Shoppe, and of course we continue to engage neighbors through the preschool and at OP Elementary. We host numerous girl scout troops, neighborhood association meetings, youth baseball and senior softball. We have a book club, walking group, game night, and many other events. But here's where the Yard Sale opened my eyes. On the surface these events all have a stated purpose. Some are to raise funds, some are to have fun, some are to serve the community. But what if we asked at every event, in every ministry, with each encounter, "How can I be a good neighbor?" What if we looked for opportunities to invite, welcome, serve, and connect? I believe that is our mission. I believe that is what Jesus did and what Jesus would do. We caught a glimpse of the relational and Kingdom possibilities at the yard sale.

There are obstacles; there are challenges. Chief among them are fear of mess, fear of change and the misdiagnosis that what we have "in here" is somehow not for everyone "out there." But I also believe we have the faith and the desire to follow Jesus and overcome those challenges. And I believe that's where God is leading us. We have all kinds of opportunities this Fall. And these opportunities don't cost you money or skill or talent. We do need people to do certain tasks and you may not be able to volunteer for those things. But you can pray for open hearts to welcome our neighbors, welcome the stranger, welcome the messy person. And it begins with the prayer from Luke 18, "Lord, be merciful to me, the sinner." May God give us a clear understanding of ourselves, both our sin and His expansive mercy and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.