

Scripture: Mark 2:13-17

Text: Mark 2:17

Message: You hang out with whom...?

January 21, 2018; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON

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The story of this congregation is part of God's Grand Story. The story of this congregation has some very interesting chapters and stories.

We could choose to tell stories that highlight major discussions on topics of doctrine and theology. Or stories about building upkeep and choosing to move from Highway 2 to this location. We could choose stories of discussions about worship choices and styles. There might be some stories that involve former pastors. There are a lot of stories that could be told about the history of our church. The stories of a church say a lot about the identity of a church.

As you consider different stories, think of a story from the Bible that would speak into that story from our church history. Is there an event in God's Grand Story that exemplifies an experience or a story from our church history? As you think about stories from the life of our church and stories from the Bible, is there a theme that runs through them?

This morning I want to consider the theme of welcome in our church's story and in the story of the call of Levi to be a disciple of Jesus. This church started as a group of Dutch immigrants. There was an occasional question of whether someone was welcome to be part of this group of worshippers, since they came from that "other" denomination in Holland. Or they came from "that" province and so they talked funny, with a strange dialect or accent. It was like they spoke a different language.

Sometimes a message of not being welcome was given. But the common experience of having come from war-torn Holland, along with the poverty of immigration and a faith in God was often enough to welcome someone. Yes, you can hang out with us on Sunday.

The story of this congregation includes support and welcome to people from different ethnic backgrounds, in supporting refugees from Vietnam and Bosnia, and more recently from Syria. Strangers whom we had never met, and whose language we could not speak, were given the financial and social support to make Canada and Brockville their home. They were welcomed, even if they did not intend to become members of this church or hang out with us very much.

You might have a story of a welcome extended to someone who did not necessarily look like all the other folk sitting in the pew in Bethel Church. Perhaps the difference had to do with a family

situation, or level of income, or clothing choices or ethnic background. However, kindness was shown. A welcome was extended. You can hang out with us. It's part of the story of this congregation, part of our history that defines who we are.

We look at this theme of welcome in our church's story as we look at the story in Mark 2 of the call of Levi to be a disciple of Jesus. There are different aspects of this biblical story that we could highlight.

One aspect of this story is the identity of Levi as a tax collector. That's a key element in this story. Tax collectors were despised, hated outcasts. Since they collected taxes for Rome from their own people, they were considered traitors. In the days of Jesus, they received less respect than lepers, Gentiles or women. A tax collector was at the lowest, most despicable level of society.

Not only were they traitors working for the Romans, they also were known for taking some extra taxes to line their own pockets. They were government authorized thieves.

Tax collectors were typically barred from the synagogue and forbidden to be called upon as a witness at a trial. "Robbers, murderers, and tax collectors" were lumped together. You get the idea.

Levi was one of "them." He had his tax booth by the lake, perhaps in a prominent traffic area where he could catch people coming and going to collect taxes. He had probably heard about Jesus from the rumours and conversations on the street. He might have heard Jesus speak. But he had never come to the point of considering to follow Jesus. He probably would not have been welcome, anyway. After all, he was a tax collector.

But one day Jesus called to Levi, "Follow me." This is another aspect of this story, the idea of the call of Jesus. "Follow me." There was love in those eyes as Jesus looked at Levi. They penetrated to Levi's heart. There was quiet, confident authority in Jesus' voice. It was convincing, attracting. "Follow me," and Levi did.

This was quite a step for Levi to simply drop everything and go. As with most tax-collectors, he would have been quite wealthy. He had an attractive business, one in which anyone could not help but get rich. Having his own booth implies that he had also worked himself up to a certain level of authority. He had it made!

But all that made no difference. That was not where life was at. There was something missing in that life and Jesus filled that emptiness. Levi simply got up, left everything, and followed Jesus. It was that quick. It was that complete. Levi was making a total break with his past. He would probably never be allowed back to his old position if he had second thoughts, or reconsidered

his decision. At least Peter, John and some others could go back to their fishing. But Levi had nothing to go back to.

That didn't bother Levi. He knew there would be no turning back. He was fully confident that his decision to follow Jesus was the right one.

How do you respond to that call to follow Jesus? What does it mean to drop everything to follow Jesus? How do you live out that call? How do you show others that you have made this decision in your life to follow Jesus?

Which leads to another aspect of this story: what Levi does as a follower of Jesus. He wants Jesus to meet his friends. But his only friends were other tax collectors. No one else would ever hang out with him. Would Jesus be willing to meet these friends?

Jesus accepts Levi's invitation to dinner at his house. Levi invites his friends to join him. Being rich, he probably had a large place with food and room for many guests. Present at this banquet is Levi, Jesus, his disciples, and a large crowd of tax-collectors and others. They are identified as "sinners," people with unsavoury reputations in the community.

What a strange mix! Jesus and his followers, who live lives obedient to God's laws, who go to synagogue regularly, respected by the people, having dinner with a bunch of social outcasts, people who made their living by deceit and theft, traitors working for the oppressive Roman government.

Like typical party-crashers, the Pharisees came along and put a damper on the gathering. They make snide comments. How can Jesus socialize with tax collectors and sinners? It's not the thing to do for those in the higher acceptable levels of society. Those awful people who sin against the God of heaven are to be avoided. To join them in one of their banquets gives the impression that you condone their actions.

Besides, associating with *those people* would make a person ceremonially unclean, according to standards of Levitical law. Eating with them brought contamination. Eating was a sign of intimacy and it placed Jesus at the same level of being like a horrible, sinning tax collector in the eyes of the Pharisees.

Jesus replies to their complaint with a sharp answer which describes his mission, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

When Jesus associates at an intimate level with people having a poor reputation, he does not do this as their buddy, as a friend in their sin. He joins them as someone who cares about them. He is someone who wants to know them and help them to see a different way to live. Jesus comes to

them as a doctor. If a doctor wishes to heal a sick person, she must get very close to that person. The doctor goes to a room of a sick person, not because she delights in disease or rejoices in suffering, but because she wants to cure and make better.

Jesus came to this earth to have fellowship with sinners. This was not to give the impression that he condoned sin or enjoyed corrupt company. Rather he went where the need was greatest, to those helplessly lost in sin. He sought them out. He offered God's love and forgiveness, hope and new life. He offers this to you and me and all kinds of sinners.

With whom do you hang out? What are the stories of this church, of your own life, that speak of sharing the good news with people others might despise? What kind of welcome do we as a church extend to those who might be unwelcome in other churches, or other social gathering places? Is this a safe church to come to meet Jesus?

But more than waiting for people to come here, how willing are we to go and hang out with others, in their homes, in their comfortable places? Will we meet them where they are at, meeting them with the love of Jesus, with the hope and peace that Jesus gives?

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Many times we put up walls – in our homes, in our churches, in our circle of friends. We put up walls that keep people like Levi out. We pick and choose. We look down on some people, like the Pharisees looked down on Levi and tax collectors and sinners. We look down on some people and conclude they are a lost cause, that they are not worth our effort and our time. We separate ourselves from the very people our Lord Jesus came to save. If Jesus acted the same way that we sometimes do he would never have called Levi. So, we need to hear the words of Jesus: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick ... I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

With whom do you hang out? To whom are you a living testimony to new life in Jesus? Who are the kind of people who feel comfortable and welcome in your presence? Do they experience the love and healing power of Jesus? What story can you tell?

Amen.