

Sunday June 11th, 2023
2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 9:9-13
“Jesus Takes Anyone and Calls Everyone.”

When I was a kid and maybe I am still a kid at heart, I used to love those cartoon shorts they showed on television. I couldn't wait to see what antics Bugs Bunny, Herman and Katnip, Mighty Mouse and others would get into. I remember lots of the crazy story lines from these cartoons, but for this morning's purpose I am thinking of one cartoon that appeared from time to time.

It was a little episode in which everything in this town was turned upside down. For example: at the local department store the sign said, “half off” and so everything in the display windows was cut in half. In another scene, a house had its pipes broken and water was pouring out of all the windows and doors. The fire department showed up and out of their fire hoses came not water, but flames which dried up the water and of course burned down the house.

I think it is fun to speculate in a cartoon about how things might be in an upside-down world. But imagine if our world was turned upside down, and in this upside-down world you could not get into a hospital unless you had a clean bill of health. In this imaginary world, doctors would not see you if you were sick, lest they catch the disease. And in this world, you could not get glasses unless you had perfect vision.

Imagine a world where people who get lost in the wilderness are required to come down the mountain and get cleaned up and patched up before the search-and-rescue team will agree to search for them. Imagine a world where teachers only taught the knowledgeable, restaurants refused to serve the hungry, and the thirsty were denied water. Imagine a world where the lonely are kept in isolation until they make friends.

This kind of world seems right out of the Twilight Zone or some horrific creation of Stephen King. What kind of world would we be in if things were like this? Is it not some kind of cruel joke that the people who need things the most, don't receive them? Well believe it or not, this kind of bizarre, upside-down world, did have an incarnation in the minds and hearts of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees, despite what we may think of them, were in many ways upstanding citizens. They were men who sincerely believed that if they isolated themselves from the rest of society, they could remain pure and thereby acceptable to God. In fact, the name Pharisee means, “Separated ones.” One of the reasons the Pharisees held such severe views is due in large part to others in their society who are called “Hellenists.”

The “Hellenists” were Jews who accepted everything from the Greco/Roman Culture without exception. The Pharisees feared that their own beliefs, and their own culture, were under constant threat from new and secular ideas, and so to preserve themselves they made long lists of strict rules and regulations, and condemned anyone who did not follow them to the letter. They also saw those whose lives were difficult, like lepers, as being cursed by God and therefore to be avoided.

Sunday June 11th, 2023
2nd Sunday after Pentecost

When we think about the Pharisees, we might chuckle to ourselves about how ridiculous their austere faith was, or how misdirected their isolationist rules were. We are fully aware in reading about Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees, that in isolating themselves, they also removed themselves from helping those that God wanted to reach. We tend to read our bibles and become quite indignant that the religious leaders would stone a woman caught in adultery or condemn Jesus for healing on the Sabbath.

What a silly, misguided bunch of individuals. I might giggle or be critical of their antics, until I begin to see their approach to faith, and life, reflected in modern Christian circles. I have been unsettled for a long time about how the Christian church has turned isolation into a thriving business. We've got Christian music, Christian concerts, Christian singles networks, Christian schools, Christian bookstores, and Christian Yellow Pages. We have just about anything you can think of wearing the label, Christian.

I have even heard of, recently, of a Christian nudist camp, but that thought makes me a bit queasy. I know many well-meaning individuals, maybe some here today, who strive to patronize as much as possible, the businesses of Christians; thus, we have the "Shepherd's Guide" recently given out in this church. Many people will vote for a candidate based not on their policies, but whether they claim the Christian moniker. It is no wonder for example, that Donald Trump is going to great lengths to paint himself as Christian.

What do you think is behind all this labeling and behaviour? I believe it is so we can do the activities and buy the products we want, without rubbing shoulders with someone who is not a Christian. I mean, we behave this way so we can go out into the world and avoid buying our groceries at a non-Christian store, lest someone speak a cuss word, or we might stumble across someone having a beer, or meeting someone with a differing world view than me.

It is the main, and often the only reason parents put forth for home schooling their children or sending them to Christian schools. What in the world are we afraid will happen if little Suzy or little Johnny hears a bad word? Let us be honest, what we fear most of all is that they will somehow become contaminated. That the foul nature we perceive in others, might somehow jump over into our kids or even ourselves.

Now to be fair, more to the Pharisees than to the modern Christian community, there are ample Old Testament arguments for separation. Leviticus 19:2 reads, "Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy." Ezra 6:12 reads, "So the Israelites who returned from exile ate (the Passover meal), together with all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbours in order to seek the Lord."

There are also numerous commands about Israelites not marrying outside the Jewish nation. This is a thought picked up in the New Testament in 2 Corinthians 6:14-17, where Paul writes that Christians should not be yoked, with non-Christians. It would certainly seem that maybe the Pharisees and maybe the isolationist nature of the Church has some biblical support.

Sunday June 11th, 2023
2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Yet, we also read passages that God's design was not for Israel to withdraw from the world, but to serve God as a "light to the nations", as Isaiah 49:6 reads.

Perhaps you remember the story of Jonah when God asked him to go and preach to the people of Nineveh. Jonah refused, mostly because he believed the Ninevites were unworthy to hear about God's willingness to forgive them if they repented. In fact, at the end of Jonah's story we find him sitting on a hill waiting for God to destroy the Ninevites and being angry when he doesn't.

This call by God to be separate and holy, has been misinterpreted both by Pharisees and by many today, and that has led to prejudice and even hatred. It is ironic that Christians, who claim to follow Christ, would have tremendous difficulty with Jesus' approach to those who were deemed unclean or sinful. If we maintain that we are to separate ourselves from the world, then how do we explain Jesus violating that principle?

If we believe we should seek holiness or godliness by avoiding places, and certain people, how do we explain our passage today from Matthew? This passage is the autobiographical account of how Matthew met Jesus and became one of his followers. To the Pharisees and likely even the disciples as well, this encounter between Matthew and Jesus is shocking.

Hear again what happened,

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

Jesus' reply to them explains it perfectly, *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice; for I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'" Maybe the problem is that we have misunderstood what it really means to be worldly. Normally we think of being worldly as being somehow connected to the people we associate with.*

In Matthew 11:19, Jesus quotes himself what people have said about him, "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'" Perhaps of all the titles applied to Jesus, "a friend of sinners" is the most surprising and yet the most appealing to me.

"Sinners" as the Pharisees meant the word, referred to anyone who did not keep the Law of Moses or the traditions of the elders. Today we might refer to "sinners" as being the "wrong kind of people". The kind of people your mother warned you about. In the gospels there is a long list of the wrong kind of people that Jesus interacts with:

Sunday June 11th, 2023
2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, the demon-possessed, lepers, Samaritans, Gentiles, promiscuous women, a Roman centurion, most of the disciples, and even people who were already dead. And what about the places he went: Samaria, the homes of tax collectors, graveyards.

What Jesus did by going to Matthew's house for supper would be akin to me meeting one of you for counseling in the local tavern. The Pharisees were outraged. Jesus was, in their minds compromise by association. And have you noticed that when Jesus met scandalized people like Matthew, he met them not in a hidden back room somewhere, but out in the open, for everyone to see. The only person Jesus seems to meet in secret is Nicodemus, who is a Pharisee.

The Pharisees believed that being around sinners was the way sin was transmitted, like how we catch a cold. Furthermore, they believed that Jesus, because of his repeated contacts with sinners, would himself become contaminated. However, as we know from scripture, sin is not a virus that we catch; it is a condition of the heart we are all born with.

You cannot catch sin simply by having lunch with a tax collector. What Jesus demonstrated was the logic of a principle we all need to appreciate. To meet people far from God, we've got to places where they are. Isolationist practices have no place in the Christian life. Now, let us be careful in stating that in no way does Christ want us to go to places where our conscience will be compromised, where the temptation would be too great to bear.

But all of us in this room have some connection to places where the lost and the soul sick are to be found. It is why I strongly advocate Christians serving on charitable boards, school councils, neighbourhood associations, coaching sports, volunteering in the community and generally getting out in the world, to seek and save the lost. And God doesn't want you to try things and go places where you are not prepared.

If you love hockey, then why not coach kids, but if you don't like hockey try something else. If you like to read, why not form a book club where you can bring a Christian perspective to people who would never enter these walls. When you host a party, why not invite some neighbours who need to meet Jesus, not to preach to them, but to initiate a relationship.

You get the idea. Worldliness is all about the condition of the heart, not about who we associate with. Phillip Yancy raises a powerful question for all of us to consider, "How did he (that is Jesus), the only perfect person in history, manage to attract the notoriously imperfect?" Even a quick glance over the Gospels shows that almost everyone, except religious people, loved to be around Jesus.

So, I wonder, if we are truly followers of Christ, do people love to be around us? Has our desire to be "set apart" or "holy" driven us away from the very people God wants us to reach?

Sunday June 11th, 2023
2nd Sunday after Pentecost

In John 17:14-18, Jesus is amid what is often referred to as his “High Priestly Prayer”, a prayer offered on behalf of his disciples and those who shall come after them. In verse 15 of that chapter, Jesus reminds us that we have an enemy, a spiritual enemy. Satan would like nothing else than for us to remain in our cocoon, where we are never a threat to his business of keeping people from God.

The people we meet who are far from God are not our enemy. They are hostages, victims and as Jesus calls them, sick people in need of a healer. They are people who have been led to believe false ideas, false impressions and to chase after false purposes; all to their ruin. John 17:18 records Jesus words in his prayer, that are our call to mission. “As you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world.”

We are in every way, shape, and form, called by God to a rescue mission. If we are ever to have any impact on the Norfolk community it won't be because of a church program, although we should have ministry programs. If we want to touch lives it won't come because of a catchy advertising program, although we should use mass media tools when we can.

Our only hope of making a real-life altering impact on our neighbours is for the people of Norfolk to see in us the life-saving joy and hope that only Christ can give. And in so seeing this in our lives, cannot help but want to share in that same joy. It is a relational necessity for every one of us. We cannot leave here today thinking, “That's right, our church should get more connected to the world.” We need to leave here today thinking, “I need to become more connected with my world.” There is a world of difference.

It is time for us to be real, fearless, and full of the Holy Spirit, as we connect our hearts with those who desperately need what only God can give.