

## **WELCOME 10<sup>th</sup> March 2019 – 1 Lent '19 C**

Luke 5:27-32

Good morning! Welcome to worship today! We are so glad you are here doing what we were made to do...offer God all that we are among his people... Please stay with us through to morning tea & beyond...all sorts of good things...

Do you ever feel pressured to do it all? Inspirational calendars & motivational apps try to convince you...

100% all yours! Eagle-soaring! All yours! Be the perfect spouse, parent, child, student, employer, employee, Christian? You ever get that sort of weight dropped on you?

Here's the truth about having it all or even all together...You can't! And that's good news because Jesus didn't come for those who think they have it all together, but for those who know they are falling apart. He didn't come for those who clawed their way to the top, but those struggling at the bottom. He didn't come for the cleaned up & respectable, but for the despised. He didn't come for those who are "healthy, wealthy, & wise," but the sick, poor, least littlest & lost. Jesus said, *"I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners & need to repent."*

Hear that?

Not for those who *THINK* they are righteous but for those who know better than to lie to themselves...to give them a place of healing... an embrace of love that transforms the place of deep deep hurt into abounding joy & the place of deep deep need into abundant eternal life.

Jesus comes for those who are in need, struggling & in need of healing. Unless you can admit your deep down & profound need, Jesus has nothing to offer you. When you acknowledge that need, Jesus has everything you need.

We'll explore & experience that together today...

Let's pray...

### **PRAYER OF THE DAY**

*God of healing and wholeness, Thank you! For all the evidence of your goodness and mercy - not only in stories of old, but in our lives today. Lives bruised with tragedy find consolation when touched by your gracious Spirit. Lives scarred with suffering and rejection have hope renewed through the power of the living Christ. We praise and adore you for hearts and lives transformed by your grace and mercy and we pray that our lives will reflect your kindness. Arouse in us we pray, a love like yours so that we reach out to this wounded and troubled world with the compassion of Christ, proclaiming the gospel with integrity and generosity of spirit to friends and strangers alike. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

## 1 LENT '19 C – AT THE TABLE: A PLACE OF HEALING

### FAITH CHAT:

1. In what circumstances do people hear the message: You don't measure up/not good enough?
2. When you think of your closest friends...Why them?

It happens so often I almost find it funny...but at least once a week I'm reminded that I'm an "outsider". It's never malicious or in a way intended to be offensive...But the minute I open my mouth & words come out...The person on the phone or across the shop counter...they know & observe, I'm not from around here. 14 years & counting (and all that goes with those 14 years) & I'm still an outsider. And I know...I still think like an outsider at times. I filter my experience through the screen of those 42 & some years in Texas/US...I see the world like I'm wearing bi-focals – in most circumstances I see what I see from at least 2 different perspectives. Doesn't mean I'm smarter than anyone else...means I have to work harder to even understand what I'm trying to understand....I have more opportunity for misunderstanding!

But my being an "outsider" doesn't hinder my engagement with my home here in Australia. I can shop where I want. Buy what I want. Pursue my vocation without hindrance. Eat where I want live where I want hang out with whomever I choose. That would NOT have been the case for Levi...This Levi is most often called Matthew in the Gospels. He is the one who eventually writes the Gospel of Matthew. In fact, after this account, he is never called Levi again. But he is an outsider & the rules were different for him.

*Later, as Jesus left the town, he saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow me & be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Levi got up, left everything, & followed him.* What Lk relates with utter simplicity was in no way simple. We sorta get it that tax collectors were viewed negatively...still are? But in occupied Israel, tax collectors kept the wheels of the occupier (Rome) greased with cash. Think about it...

1<sup>st</sup>: there was no way Levi grew up thinking, "When I grow up I wannabe a tax collector" To even think such a thing would have gotten him a hiding from his mom. But along the way he somehow chose a lucrative & relatively easy profession...at the cost of his communal religious & likely his familial attachments. He is of the priestly tribe but he has "joined" (what his name literally means) with the Romans. He is a collaborator in his people's oppression. In so many ways he is a man without a country. Despised by the Romans because he's a Jew. Despised by Jews because he works for Rome Matthew/Levi is the dictionary definition of outsider.

The Romans had a weird way of collecting taxes...*tax farming*. They would assess a set \$\$ figure to an area & the Chief Tax Collector for that area (think Zaccheus) hired lots of under-collectors to collect that figure, or as much as they could & they all enjoyed the "gravy" – the overage. The under-collectors could set up their booths wherever/whenever they chose & they always had a couple of Roman soldiers (guys who were too big/lazy/incompetent to be good soldiers) as their helpers...You know the sort of help they provided. They stopped the travellers or carts or donkeys & searched the baskets & bags for something to tax. They guarded the money box & dissuaded any disagreement with the on-the-spot assessments.

In so many ways he is a man without a country. Despised by the Romans because he's a Jew. Despised by Jews because he works for Rome. Matthew/Levi is the dictionary definition of outsider. Not allowed into the Temple to worship God or present sacrifices for forgiveness. Shunned in the local synagogue because of his job. He was considered worse than a Gentile...at least Gentiles couldn't help it...Mt chose.

*Later, as Jesus left the town, he saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow me & be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Levi got up, left everything, & followed him.* There is some scholarly thought that Mt was already following Jesus... Why? Well...even at this early stage of Jesus' ministry he was always drawing a crowd & what better place to set up your tax-booth than where there are lots of people to tax? There's always someone passing by on their way to market... transporting lumber or pottery or farm goods... & a tax to be paid. So it's possible Levi has been shadowing Jesus...listening curious hearing what he was forbidden to hear.

My sense is, Jesus "saw" Mt more than a few times b/4 this, but the text says he "saw" Levi & the Gk word means more than just saw – it means "to take in with studied contemplation." Jesus looks not "at" Mt but "into" him...*God looks not at the surface but at the heart...1 Sam 16:7* that's what you have here...Jesus looks at a man who has been told his whole adult he was going to hell. All his life, Levi had heard it was impossible for God to forgive him. Every day of his life he was reminded by at least 1 of those he taxed that he was doomed to spend his miserable existence as an outsider & Yahweh had a special place reserved for outsiders like him.

Matthew got out of bed that morning as a man without a country as the dictionary definition of outsider but at this very moment...he is staring into the face of love, he is eye to eye with acceptance, & most of all, he sees that his life is held

in the hands of forgiveness. Levi gets it at a level deeper than he has ever comprehended anything ever in his life that right now he is seeing his life healed his heart restored & his existence reborn & he jumps at that gift...by the way... Matthew means "gift of God."

There is nothing that sets this tax collector apart from or above you or me...His need is equal to ours. There is no better or worse sinner. There is only sinner in need of redeeming - sick in need of healing....and that's every living one of us.

The only thing that qualifies us to be followers of Jesus is that we are sinners who need grace. Sinners are the only kind of people Jesus calls. Jesus did not call us because of our righteousness or gifting. He called us when all we had was need. For everyone who thinks their life is too small to be noticed or cared about by God, for everyone who is convinced they've screwed up life too badly, for those who somehow believe they are in a special category of unlovable irredeemable...who live in some special land of outsider that God never visits...To you Jesus says: *"Follow me & be my disciple,"* So Levi got up, left everything, & followed him. He might've left some instructions to his bodyguard about what to do w/ the booth & the \$\$ & to tell the boss "I quit." But that was it. He walked away & never looked back.

Now remember...at this point Levi hasn't seen the inside of a synagogue in years. Hasn't been in worship in so long he can't remember. Hasn't heard the Scriptures read publically for a long time...but he remembers a verse/two from his childhood: *Maybe it's Ps 107:1-2 - Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever. Has the Lord redeemed you? Then speak out! Tell others he has redeemed you from your enemies.* Maybe remembering only that verse he throws a party for his friends...the only ones he has: other tax collectors, a bookie or two, guy who runs a shady card game every Friday when the good people are settling in for Sabbath, a coupla ladies who do that "oldest profession" stuff?

Why? 2 reasons: 1 - He didn't know any religious people...social elite...upright & socially acceptable. Those folks didn't want him for a friend. So Levi just texted those friends he did have, & invited them & Jesus over for dinner. 2 - Because at this moment he feels better about life than he has since he got past puberty. Levi has found what he was looking for in Jesus, Jesus has found what he was looking for in Matthew & he wants to share that experience of Jesus with as many of his friends as he can.

This is what makes me love Jesus...& get cranky with Christians (especially clergy). When Jesus calls us to follow him, what he really means is "Can I follow you into your house & into your workplace...school...bowling club...Rotary...PROBUS & among your friends so you can introduce them to me?" Jesus is just stoked to sit down for dinner with a bunch of riff-raff...He's right at home with a rabble of nobodies, derelicts & castoffs. When the Pharisees saw this, they had a conpition. They were horrified. That's how the self-righteous react when anyone takes Jesus seriously & lends a shoulder to lean on or a hand-up in loving ways toward those society considers sinful. But Jesus eats with them, not just so that He can befriend them, but so that He can forgive/heal them & call them to repentance...new life

Jesus scandalized the religious hotshots by refusing to view the world through their "good people/bad people" lens. Jesus saw through all that & knew there are only sinners & those who lie to themselves about how bad off they really are.

And notice...Jesus makes no excuses for the dinner guests. He doesn't say, "Aw lighten up! They're great folks...a little rough around the edges but basically good people." No...no excuses...no whitewash...Just an observation, Lk 5:31-32 here "Who goes to the Dr? Healthy people or sick people?" He wants them to understand that the REAL Dr. is in the house & sick people have come running. Underneath that is the not-so-subtle zinger "& if you were honest about your own sickness, you'd pull up a chair & sit with us. You'd get off your high horse, grab a plate of hot wings & come get well." There is no pretense to perfection in the presence of the Great Physician. Just Jesus & those who know their need is bigger than their résumé.

Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis GP today: "God is a potter. He works with mud." Like Matthew the tax collector, Peter the fisherman, Simon the Zealot, Judas the betrayer, John the Texan...you & you & you...buckets of mud each one of us. A sicker band of misfits you couldn't catch in a week of Border Security episodes. Except of course Jesus loves each & every one...& chooses each & every one to bear his image & be filled with his love & carry that same love to the world...*"I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners & need to repent."* Not those who *THINK* they are righteous but those who know better than to lie to themselves...to give them a place of healing...an embrace of love that transforms the place of deep deep hurt into abounding joy & the place of deep deep need into abundant eternal life. When you acknowledge that need, Jesus has everything you need.

Jesus looks at this world this rabble of nobodies, derelicts & riff-raff & says *"Hey... Follow me & be my disciple. I want you. I love ya! I want ya! Gotta have ya!"* And that means you & that means me & that means Jesus was killed & raised again to put to death the whole foul "in/out" rubbish...to once & for all look each one of us right in the eye & right to our

heart & soul to say "I love you & I want you to be with me & to be my disciple...to live with me & learn from me & follow me & say to all the other nobodies you know I love them & I want them too."

Let's pray with that in mind...***Lord Jesus, we can offer nothing but our brokenness trusting you to heal and restore us in your love. We bring to your table only our need, our wide open hearts and hands trusting you to fill the emptiness that lingers. Love us so hard that we have no choice but to speak out and tell others you have redeemed us. We pray in your Name. Amen.***