

**Calling All Sinners**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr**  
**First Presbyterian, New Canaan – June 11, 2023**

**PLEASE READ:**  
**Romans 4:13-25**  
**Matthew 9:9-13**

Jesus calls the most unlikely people! That's the first shocking revelation of our Gospel text this morning... Last Sunday we celebrated communion and you came forward down the center aisle to receive. I was sitting in my chair and looking from behind the servers I saw each face coming to receive a piece of bread and a sip of grape juice. As I looked at each face, memories of the past few years together flooded my mind. You are good people, kind people, generous people. But I think we all will agree. You and I are *flawed* people.

I was reading a piece by Nadia Bolz-Weber recently, probably the most honest preacher I know. She writes, "Some people make a living off of being sort of influencers, who say things that might kind of be true, but they never feel honest. They feel like they're ignoring a darker side of our hearts. I always want somebody to acknowledge the shadowy contours of my human heart, and then talk about where some grace or hope or forgiveness is. Because I feel like when those things are ignored, it just fills me a little bit with despair, even though they're telling me something really chipper. I like it when writers or preachers are willing to be honest about their own struggles in a real way."

If we're completely honest, we know we are not gathered together today except for one reason. We are *called*. It may sound strange to say it, but we are here today in worship because even in some vague way, we understand that God has called us.

Indeed, today's Gospel text first of all reminds us that in his walking along, *en passen* style of ministry, Jesus calls whomever he will. Jesus did not call the religious experts of his day. No, Jesus called people like Matthew, the tax collector (a man others would have seen as a traitor, because he was working for the Romans, and a cheat, because everyone knew tax collectors skimmed off the top to pad their own pockets). He was a sinner, one who others saw as a moral failure. The best definition of sin is "not the way it's supposed to be." They had failed to live up to their potential. But Jesus went to them and called them to be his church. Interestingly, church, literally, *ekklesia* in Greek, means, "ones called out."

That Jesus calls all sinners should not surprise us, as throughout history God has called leaders from among the most questionable and inappropriate folks: Jacob, the swindler. Moses, an abandoned child-murderer-run-away, fugitive. David, the adulterer and murderer-king. There is Mary, the lowly maidservant. And Peter, the betrayer coward. Or Paul, the hot-head convert, riot-provoking jailbird

evangelist... Today in our Romans text, we are reminded of Abram, later named Abraham, and his call to pursue God's promises. I love two phrases in this text, first that "it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace... and that "it was reckoned to him as righteousness..." No doubt about it. Abraham wasn't a righteous man, but God's grace was sufficient for him, and he got the gift of righteousness credited to him...

So as Jesus walks along the byways and highways of our lives, his call goes out to even you. That's why you're here. The call of Jesus, "Follow me," is for you, however unqualified a candidate you may be. It happened to me while I was sowing my oats in Japan. I had the privilege of working with the ministry of education for the Japanese government just out of my college studies.

There I was in Kanazawa, Japan, traveling around visiting schools and meeting with principles, students and teachers every day. In the evenings I would meet with administrators and teachers, and well, the social life in Japan involves drinking... a lot of drinking. I'm ashamed to say it, but one night I had way too much to drink and woke up in my own vomit. I embarrassed myself and my office. God spoke very loudly to me, "This is not what I had in mind for your life. You must go." There's more to the story, and I went to seminary not imagining I would be a pastor. The "call" then was simply to seek God. It was the beginning of my learning to listen to God's call and take the next step on the journey of faith, and I've been trying ever since, pursuing ordination, getting married, raising a family, discerning what in my life does the Lord yet have to redeem and restore so that the promise may rest on grace and that it may be reckoned to me as righteousness...

Here in New Canaan, I wonder what hearing and following the call of Jesus looks like? What does it mean to live by faith? Diana Butler Bass writes, "Love must be our answer — loving God, our neighbors, and creation. But love is far more than good feelings or emotions. Love must be organized, active, and committed to the full dignity and worth of everyone. It isn't enough to preach against hate. Hate is infiltrating our everyday lives — like the poisoned air filtering down from northern wildfires — hardly visible until the air is so thick with toxins that no one will be able to breathe. You can't get rid of the smoke. You have to put out the fire."

Notice what happens next in the text. After the call to follow, there is a quick move from discipleship to fellowship. Jesus is reclining at table with his friends, very likely at Matthew's house. Immediately, the individual call is connected with community. For Matthew, the tax collector, it is not just a matter of *believing in* Jesus, it is a matter of *belonging to* the community which Jesus forms.

Today we are welcoming Stephanie on to our staff team and getting her integrated

into our community. Part of that integration process involves a staff covenant. We want to build community here along our mission statement and values. It's important that the relationships of our leadership team, whether staff or Session and Deacons, or Sunday School Teachers and Choir members reflect the heart of the love we proclaim we believe! As Christians we do just about everything that's worth doing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is not just a label we stick on everything to make it kosher! At the very heart of God's being is relationship empowered by love.

Last week was Trinity Sunday, and I mentioned how John of Damascus, a Greek theologian who lived in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, developed the concept of *perichoresis* as a metaphor to understand the Trinity. *Peri* means "around," and *choresis* means literally "dancing" as in choreography. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are like three dancers moving together in harmonious, creative, joyful freedom.

Trinity is the very nature of God, and this God is a centrifugal force, flowing outward and then centripetally drawing all things back into the dance. If this God creates "in our image, after our likeness", then there must be a "family resemblance" between everything else and the nature of the heart of God.

It's amazing to me that scientists discover this reality as they look through microscopes and telescopes. They are finding that energy is actually in the space between atomic particles and between the planets and the stars—in the relationships more than the particles! This seems to mean that reality is relational at its core. When we really understand Trinity, however slightly, it's like we live in a different universe—and a very good and inviting one!

It is all the more shocking, then, to realize how Jesus reached out from that perfect community of Triune Love to invite the likes of us to join in the dance. Jesus expanded the circle around the table with tax collectors and sinners just like us...

Which brings us to the third important shift in our text: Did you notice who criticizes Jesus and his community? Do you see who is most scandalized by the fact that Jesus is in fellowship with the likes of Matthew and his sinner friends? The religious people, the insiders of the faith, the church watchdogs, the scriptural legalists who thought they could keep every dot and tittle of the law...

The caution here for us is that while we would all like to identify with Matthew and the other sinners, sometimes we in the church find ourselves playing the part of the party-police, the Pharisees who come in and stop the music because we're offended by the kind of people Jesus calls to himself!

The real challenge is to recognize that the call from Christ is to extend the circle to even those most unlike yourself. I encourage you to go to the Juneteenth celebration at the Historical Society this Wednesday. Put up a rainbow flag to show your support for the LGBTQ community. Take time to listen to the views of those who have different political views than your own. Whoever you may be, will there be room in your circle for the “other” friends of Jesus?

Jesus responds to his critics and declares his mission: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick... (and recalling the words of Hosea 6:6) ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” We follow Jesus by learning the dance of mercy, not sacrifice, by extending healing, not judgment to the broken and hurting in our midst.

I’ll close with one of my favorite stories called “Encounter with God” in *Mortal Lessons*. Dr. Richard Selzer, a surgeon, recalls standing by the bed "where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish." He had to remove a tumor from the woman's cheek. In doing so, it was necessary to sever one little nerve. From that time on, her face would be contorted.

He writes, "Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of her bed and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. 'Who are they,' I ask myself, 'he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously?' The young woman speaks, 'Will my mouth always be like this?' she asks. 'Yes,' I say, 'it will. It's because the nerve was cut.' She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. 'I like it,' he says. 'It's kind of cute.' And he bends to kiss her crooked mouth and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate hers, to show her their kiss still works."

I wonder if the call is really a kiss? God, you see, accommodates us by coming to our twisted reality with love. Jesus’ contorted body on the cross fits the distorted reality of our sin and broken lives. Jesus fit perfectly the kiss needed to heal the broken relationship between us and God... that the promise may always rest on grace! It’s from this place we learn to respond to the call of Jesus. By grace we affirm how we have been chosen, unlikely and unqualified sinners that we are, to be in intimate relationship with our Maker, to take a hand in the circle, and dance with mercy and love with others who are broken and hurting... Yes, Jesus is *calling all sinners....* even you. The question is, how will you respond?

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*