

Hosea 6:1-6
Romans 8:18-25
Matthew 9:9-13

September 18, 2016
St. Timothy's

“Next Steps: Sinners Welcome”

One of the critiques of the Christian Church, often expressed by those looking (from the outside) at what's happening inside, is that those involved in the church, those who profess to be followers of Jesus, are more concerned with whether people are behaving in the right ways and believing the right things than they are with a love and concern for the people they are called to reach. The critique is that the church is too judgmental. There's too much hypocrisy taking place (within the walls) among those who claim to (be concerned) about those outside the walls.

And so the expression goes, “We love your Jesus. We're just not in love with your church. We love who your Savior is and what he has done (and accomplished) for the world. We're just not (so excited) about who you are and what you are failing to do (and accomplish) in the world. And so (right or wrong, accurate or not), the critique of the church stands, while the call given (to the church) falls short.

How do we balance Jesus' call to be living faithfully as followers of his, without becoming judgmental of those who are not? How do we fulfill our commission to lead people to Christ, without allowing the hypocrisy (of our own lives) to chase them away?

Today we're in the second week of a series designed to challenge us in our faith-walk with Jesus. No matter where we're at, the invitation and challenge (Jesus gives), the purpose of these ten weeks is to help us take the next steps in becoming the kind of people Jesus wants us to be.

Last week, we started with a comparison of two of the gospel stories (those stories of Jesus' life) where he calls some of his first followers. We looked at what Matthew tells us (in his story) and compared it with what Luke tells us (about the same story) in his.

What we found was that when Jesus calls us to be his followers, all he's really calling us to do is to take the next step. (That's all he wants.) He doesn't call us to drop everything we're doing and follow. He doesn't expect us to move from where we are in life (today) to where he wants us to be (in our lives) tomorrow.

What he does is he calls us to take him at his word and see what happens. What he expects (and wants from us) is that we give (whatever it is) he is (asking us to do) a chance. Even if we're skeptical about what he says. Especially if we don't believe it will work. All he calls us to do is to take the next step, if even only in one area of life, to take him at his word and try what he says.

Today, it's a similar story, not about the calling of a few fisherman who ended up becoming followers, but the story about a man who was doing something (with his life) that many in his day might have expected to have disqualified him from even having a chance.

Matthew, chapter nine is where it starts. Beginning in verse nine, Matthew's telling us his own story. (He says), “As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew (the one who wrote the gospel) sitting at the tax collector's booth. ‘Follow me,’ he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.”

It's interesting in the gospels how the stories of Jesus' life are so overwhelmingly relational. From beginning to end, as you read through the (different accounts), what stands out repeatedly is God's desire (in Jesus) to have a relationship with us. It's not a story about rules (in life) we're supposed to follow. It's not about (things in life) we're supposed to do. It's about the relationship Jesus wants. It's about the way in which he wants us to relate to him.

Read through the stories and you'll find it showing up in a variety of ways. Jesus talks about how he came to show us the Father, how God the Father wants (more than anything) to be in a relationship with us.

He uses the image of the Vine and the branches, how Jesus is the Vine and we are the branches, and how we (as the branches) find our strength as we stay connected to him.

He talks about being a Good Shepherd who cares for the sheep. “My sheep hear my voice (he says) when I call, and when I call, they come.” In each case, it's the relationship that makes the difference. It's that connection with Jesus that matters.

In the story today, it's important to remember that because there's nothing in the story (of Matthew's calling) that would have indicated that Matthew was worth calling, apart from the relationship Jesus wants.

What was he doing? He was sitting at a tax collector's booth. He was collecting taxes. I don't know what to compare that to in our day? (It was different in Jesus' day.) In Jesus' day, tax collectors were about as bad as you could get. They were traitors. They worked for Rome. Their job was to collect taxes from the Jews and give (what they collected) to the Roman government.

And, not only that, but they were cheats. They were dishonest. They not only collected taxes for Rome, but they took more than was needed for themselves. As a result, they were rich, and they were rich at their fellow Jews expense. And everyone knew it, including the Jews, including the Romans, including Matthew, and including Jesus.

And yet (in the story) Jesus calls Matthew to follow. He calls him to begin a relationship with him. And so what happens? Matthew gets up and leaves his tax collecting booth and follows. And that's when (and where) the relationship starts.

Now, I don't want to stay on this too long, because there are other things we need to get to. But I also don't want us to miss the point. When Jesus calls Matthew to follow, what he didn't say is "If you are willing to (do whatever), then you can follow." (He didn't say that.) What he said was, "In spite of what we all know you are doing (and for a long time) have done, how about doing something different and for a short time and see what happens?"

And so, what happens? (Verse ten), "While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' came and ate with him and his disciples."

Do you see what's happening in the story? Do you see what Jesus does, the kind of relationship he wants? What he does is he goes to Matthew's house. He goes to where Matthew would have obviously felt at home.

It's like the story of Zacchaeus, when Jesus (called him down) from that tree. He went to his house and had dinner. He went to a place where Zacchaeus (as a sinner), felt at home. It's the same thing with Matthew; so much (at home) that many tax collectors and sinners were there as well.

Do you see what's going on? Do you see what Jesus does, (what he's willing to do)? Immediately after calling Matthew to become one of his followers, Jesus (himself) goes to a place that might ruin his own reputation (among the people), but to a place where a relationship (with some of his people) might have a chance.

I hope you know that about Jesus. I hope you understand how he works. Jesus was extraordinarily comfortable with people who were not like him. (He really was.) And not only that but people who were not like him, were also extraordinarily comfortable with him. (It worked both ways.) In fact, it still does.

I hope you know that. Jesus is not put off by your sin. Jesus is not uncomfortable with the things (in your life) that have happened. (You know what's happened.) You know your sin. It doesn't matter to Jesus. In spite of what's happened, (in spite of your sin), Jesus still wants to hang out. He still wants to be your friend. He still wants it.

Now, if it doesn't matter to Jesus and he still wants to hang out with you (and with us), what does that mean for us, when we think about who it might be good for us to hang out with?

The Pharisees didn't like where this was going, the religious leaders. (You remember the story.) Verse eleven, "When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?'" Why does he hang out with people who are not like him?

You can just (hear) what they were thinking. (They didn't have to say it.) He's a religious man, just like us. He follows God, he's a good teacher, he knows what he's saying and doing. (We've seen it.) It's who he is. It's what he's all about. And so why does he (seem to like) hanging out with all these sinners, and why does he (not seem to like) hanging out with us?"

(Verse twelve), "On hearing this (overhearing this), Jesus goes right after it. He says, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. Go and learn what this means. 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'" End of story. End of conversation. End of debate.

Let me give you three quick points (when it comes to being followers of Jesus), and then I'll close with a comment. (First the points, number one): Being a sinner does not disqualify you from following Jesus. It is a prerequisite. Being a sinner does not disqualify you. It is a prerequisite.

Maybe that sounds funny, but it's true. Every person who has ever accepted Jesus' invitation to follow was a sinner; every one of them. They were all sinners. The only ones who rejected the invitation were those who didn't think they were.

It's the old "Why do I need a Savior?" question. (Every generation asks that.) "Why do I need a Savior?" The answer is "You don't" if you don't think you have a problem. You don't, if you think it's all good. You only need saving when you're in trouble. You only need a Savior when you can't save yourself.

The truth is we can't save ourselves, and we are in trouble. Our sin blocks that relationship God wants to have. And that's why we need Jesus. That's why God sent his Son. That's why he ended up on a cross.

I don't care what's happened in your life. There is no sin that puts you outside the invitation. There is no sin not covered by the blood of Christ. Being a sinner does not disqualify you (from following). It is a prerequisite.

Number two: Being an unbeliever does not disqualify you from following Jesus. Again, that might sound a bit strange, but just think about it. None of those who followed Jesus started as believers. None of them did.

Now, they became believers as they followed, but they didn't start as believers. Even the disciples, they didn't start as believers. Even after three years, (they were slow), they still were not sure. Until Jesus died and came back to life, (and finally) it started sinking in.

It doesn't matter if you have questions. You can still be a follower. It doesn't matter if you have faith. Faith comes hearing (and seeing) and experiencing what Jesus can do in your life. Try following, and see what happens. Try hearing and listening, and see what follows. Even if you don't believe; even if you have a (hard time) believing, you can still follow. I dare you to try.

And third: The invitation (Jesus offers) to follow is not to a set of rules, but to a relationship. It's not an invitation to keep the commandments, to begin doing all the right things. It's an invitation to begin a relationship with the One who has done all of the right things and who can help you to change.

That was the problem with the Pharisees. Their message was simple: "Change and you can join us." (That's what they said.) For Jesus, it was just the opposite. They said, "Change and you can join us." Jesus said, "Join us and you will change." But you don't have to change before you join. You don't even have to believe, just follow.

And now the comment...and this goes back to the critique (with which we started), from those outside these walls, that those of

us (inside these walls) are too judgmental. I don't know want to argue the case, one way or another. (I really don't.) In many cases, I know it's not true. I've seen many faithful Christians (over the years) who (I know) bend over backwards not to judge. In many cases, I know it's not true. In other cases, perhaps it is. If we're honest, we'd have to admit there's an element of hypocrisy in all of us. I don't want to argue the case.

What I will argue and what I've seen and know (to be) the case is that the moment we take our eyes off of Jesus is the same moment we begin looking at others. And the moment we begin looking at others is the same moment we start to compare. And if we're not looking to Jesus, then the comparison we make (when we look to others) is with ourselves. And when the comparison of others is with ourselves, that's when our lives, (instead of looking like Jesus), start looking like a bit pharisaic. And when that happens, then the critique (from the outside world) stands, and commission and calling of Jesus falls short.

The key is to keep your eyes on Jesus, to never take your eyes off of Christ. When that happens, (in worship, in Bible classes, in youth ministry, "Grow Groups, St. Tim's Kids, in your own prayer life), wherever it is, then watch out, because that's when God works and lives change.

The key is to keep your eyes on Jesus, tax collectors and sinners that we are, he's our only hope. Let's pray.

Lord, Jesus, we thank you for your calling to be followers and for not requiring us to fit in and have it all together before we start. We thank you for your love and your forgiveness and for the chance we have, in following you, to begin to change.

Lord, help us to change, especially in those areas of our lives where we are too quick to judge others and where we are not even aware of how hypocritical we might be. Help us to take the next steps in comparing ourselves only with you, so that as we make that comparison, we remember our need and our hope. In your name we pray. Amen.