

Fraternizing with the Enemy

Matthew 9:9-13

sermon digest

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Our church served as host for the annual community observance of Martin Luther King Day last Monday, and three of our members shared memories of the stormy days of what we have come to know as “the civil rights movement.” The impact on daily life of racial integration was a social revolution rivaling the Civil War and the two world wars that followed. At least annually we are reminded that racial integration is not a done deal, that walls of segregation still exist in the culture and that seeds of prejudice and bigotry continue to grow in the minds of the people. My personal shock came with the discovery that the social revolution had major theological dimensions. It was not limited to the secular culture of bathrooms, water fountains, public schools, lunch counters, and hospitals. I was coming of age and preparing for ministry. While racists were attacking black churches with literal bombs, social bombshells were exploding in white churches. Someone observed that the most segregated hour of the week came at 11:00 on Sunday morning. The call for integration was costly, and few pastors were willing to pay the price. I recall a few years ago a newspaper story about a prominent super-church in Dallas. The reporter noted that the membership was exclusively white and middle to upper class. When the pastor was asked about the monolithic nature of his congregation, he commented, “‘Birds of a feather flock together,’ you know.” Unfortunately, he was right about human nature and birds.

A neglected dimension of the gospel confronts us again. Real Christians must come to terms with the inclusive love of Christ. The radical reformation in our time has come with a shift in paradigms for the church from the *exclusive* gathering of God’s favorites to the *inclusive* diversity of the family of God. For the past half-century we have had to come to new terms with the Christ who has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us (Ephesians 2:14) and the God who shows no partiality (Acts 10:34). But the inclusive gospel is also in the Gospels.

The enemy is us. Most of us have encountered the famous Pogo cartoon by Walt Kelly in which the cartoon character ends the preparation for war in the swamp with the statement, “We have found the enemy, and it is us.” Matthew is focused on the new understanding of the Law and Prophets through the gospel of Christ. It seems that the traditions were being turned upside-down and that the first and the last were exchanging places. It was the Jesus social revolution.

Matthew copies Mark in telling the story. Mark’s story is about Levi, son of Alphaeus. The first Gospel ties Levi to Matthew, the man for whom the Gospel is named. As a tax collector, he is something of a social outcast. The KJV utilized the Latin *publicanus* to translate the Greek word *telones*, tax collectors. The Gospels contain about twenty references to Publicans. They were viewed as traitors, generally shunned by the righteous. They were identified with prostitutes, adulterers, gentiles, and extortioners. They were about as welcome in a Jewish gathering as an IRS investigator on a sunny April 16th morning. The contract with Rome to collect provincial property and income taxes was usually held by a foreigner. The Publicans were usually Jews employed by the foreign lords to do the dirty business of exploiting the people.

Jesus is consistently accused of keeping company with all of the wrong people of whom the Publicans were perhaps the most offensive. While the conventional wisdom of the day divided the people into two classes, the righteous and the sinners, based on one’s meticulous observance of the holiness code, the gospel of Jesus saw all people as sinners within the reach of God’s grace.

Two of the most famous Publicans in the Gospels were Zacchaeus and Matthew, both examples of conversion and identified among the disciples. Some argue that they were not necessarily evil and that taking a commission for collecting taxes was a legitimate business. When Zacchaeus promises to return fourfold, “if I have defrauded anyone of anything,” he probably felt safe. We have heard it before. In the business of business, the goal is profit. It’s nice if everyone wins, but profiting from someone else’s mistakes, misfortune, or lack of power and influence is just part of the game. The story of Zacchaeus is located in Luke shortly after the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. Publicans are especially within reach of God’s grace when they acknowledge the need of divine forgiveness and radical repentance. Of greater significance is that a Publican would be counted among the Twelve, the closest associates of Jesus in the work of the Kingdom.

I recall the flap over a proposal to rent space in the denominational building to the local ecumenical association in Louisville. The problem seemed to boil down to the connections implied in the association that included not only churches but a synagogues, mosques, and Unitarians. According to the opposition, we could not allow the “wrong people” to come walking into our building. If we embrace the diversity of this association we might imply approval of theologies and behaviors that we find offensive. It suddenly occurred to me just how close this was to the situation of Jesus in the Gospels. I raised a question, “if we think that these people are wrong, shouldn’t we want them to come into our building? When are ever going to have a conversation with sinners if we don’t let them in?”

Someone compared the social repugnance of Publicans with bartenders, the last people on earth that you would expect to find at church. Carlyle Marney loved to say and do things that set off alarms in the sacred halls.

He commented in one of his sermons that pastors would do well to learn from bartenders how to listen to people. My friend was teaching a seminary class on the church and the community and took his students on a field trip through some of the bars of Louisville. He rightly observed that ministers did not know how the secular world lived, that in order to reach outside the safe population of church folks, ministers needed to get acquainted with the world. The summer I spent working for a swimming pool contractor in Houston proved to be better than many of my seminary classes in preparing for ministry. In fact, Levi/Matthew probably had a lot more in common with tax collectors than Peter, James, or John. The genius of AA has been the obvious fact that it takes one to know one.

Church is a lost and found. Church is the most elaborate lost and found in town. Any church that has been around for awhile has gathered up a store of lost keys--safety deposit box, house, auto, padlock, desk. There is enough jewelry to start a store especially since single earrings are now in demand. Umbrellas come and go according to the weather. If you are in the market for a used Bible, church is the place to go--all translations, any color, and furnished with articles of poetry, obituaries, pressed flowers, and family photos. Since most Bibles function as small file cabinets, a pastor can really grow in knowledge of his people by leafing through lost Bibles, and orphaned Bibles are always available to the folks who need to read the text during a Bible study. I heard of a case where a pair of lady's pointed toe, high heel shoes were found by the janitor on Monday morning under a pew. I always wonder if she is still free of those instruments of torture. On occasion pastors have found abandoned husbands, wives, and children. I like the sign a few years ago in Mickie's Produce: "Children left here will be sold."

Church is a lost and found for people. The healthiest church is not a monolithic community where everyone has been cut from the same block, the same religious background, and everyone is the same age, size, race, or gender. Because none of us can claim a place of superiority, we ought to be a building without walls and a yard without fences. The healthy church is a diversity of folks from all walks of life. Jesus came to break down the walls that segregate us, not only in terms of race, but in every area of our lives where we are tempted to cut off a segment of humanity. I have come to appreciate the logo found in many of the publications of the International Council of Community Churches, "As Inclusive as the Love of Christ." That is the message of Matthew about Matthew that reverberates in every segregated compartment of human life.