

SERMON: “...like me: accepted by grace”

Rev. Geoff Ross; St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church. Sunday, March 4, 2018

[Recap:A&E/Sin/Fall- Beginning Grace. Abram:chosen by grace – a gift given beyond our deserving. Nicodemus – wretch like you/me overcome gap:person we are/meant to be – reborn/again by grace. Without grace/lost/no chance to be reconciled/saved: Grace:“*last best word*”/PY – God's love/saving plan for us. Still we doubt/suspicious/offended by grace.]

If you weren't scandalized/shocked/outraged by this passage, you should've been! Both readings are scandalous/shocking; what they report/record is an outrage if you're a person who loves justice – the justness/rightness/fairness – who loves the law. And that's the problem with grace; it's not justice – earthly/human justice/law – as we expect it to be: commit the crime, do the time. Trust me, if you were there – in the crowd or the early Church – you would've been outraged/angry: while we accept that justice is blind; but with the call of Levi/Matthew and Saul/Paul, it seems that justice hasn't been served. It is lost but grace is found.

When I say this passage is scandalous it's not just for shock value, it is true. But grace is scandalous – even though it is the defining aspect of the relationship between God and humanity/us: which is a good thing/without grace – God's freely/lavishly/unilaterally giving/gifting grace undeservedly to us – we'd be lost before God. As such the Bible/Gospel – Jesus, His message/actions – is outrageous. Everything He said/did upset the “*way things were done,*” the recognized/acknowledged practices/attitudes, but with His call to Levi/Matthew He created a tabloid-worthy scandal. This story is shocking because, grace – when it happens to us is ok/welcomed, but when it happens to/for others – especially them, you know, those people – is offensive. But what is scandalous to some is amazing to others. Let me explain.

Levi was a tax collector – a state-sanctioned robber contracted/paid by the occupying Romans to ‘collect’ taxes to support their empire/army; anything he could extract from his neighbours, above the ‘tax’, was his: he made his living taking money from his neighbours for the hated/feared/enemy. To make matters worse, he lived with the people he stole from: it takes a hard/pitiless person to do that. No wonder he was hated! In the world of “*us verses them*” Levi was one of “***them.***” He was shunned/hated – an outcast – for good reason. No one talked/associated with him, his friends were other outcasts like him. Then along comes Jesus and He not only talks to Levi He invites him to follow Him: leaving everything/his old life behind. And, if that wasn't bad enough, Jesus agrees to sit down to a meal with Him! Amazed Levi has no problem with Jesus' offer of grace, but others did. To Levi's neighbours, Jesus' disciples, and even the Pharisees; this was scandalous/outrageous.

[Eating with = acceptance. Why God's grace = meals/banquets/Communion: accepted.]

Not willing to accept Jesus' grace toward Levi/Matthew, the Pharisees challenge the

disciples: *“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and other sinners?”* Jesus answers their hard/rigid hearts/faith with three statements that amount to a declaration of His saving mission. First He responds with a proverb saying, *“Healthy people don’t need a doctor, ...sick people do;”* next He quotes the Hebrew Scriptures, *“‘Instead of offering sacrifices ...be merciful/graceful to others.’”* And, lastly, in a complete upheaval of the Pharisees’ understanding of God/law/grace Jesus tells them bluntly: *“I didn’t come to invite good people to be my followers. I came to invite sinners.”* And with these words, Levi – a man who had heard/known many hateful/hurtful words/acts – experienced something he never had before: acceptance.

[Human needs: accepted/love. Created by relational God/community: by love/for love.]

The call of Levi/Matthew is full of grace and acceptance – not just for Levi/Matthew, but for us as well: it reveals that grace is essential to God’s saving plan for us personally/communally. Without grace our sin separates us from God’s presence/love – from being accepted by God. The same happens in our human relationships: grace – the forgiveness/absolution/release from the sin that divides us – is necessary for us to live together/love/accept one another. Given by God, grace frees us to offer it just as freely to those outside/out-there/outcast, to those in need of it most: Levi/Matthew – like you/me – having receiving the gift of grace did what God had done for him; excited, he threw a party for his hated ‘lost/outcast/rejected’ friends: those who had never been welcome before were now accepted by grace.

And this is what grace is all about – this is why it’s so hard for us to understand: it accepts those we can’t/won’t/wouldn’t – because grace sees beauty in everyone. As such, grace isn’t fair. The good news about grace – the wonder of God’s love – is that we don’t “get what we deserve.” Levi knew he was a ‘sinful’ man and yet, after being accepted by grace, for the rest of his life he wondered at the fact that a wretch like him could receive God’s grace: by accepting it he is reborn as Matthew, becoming one of Jesus’ primary disciples who extended grace to others/led a community of believers – and wrote a Gospel – that embodied/revealed that love/grace. Levi/Matthew accepted – and was accepted by – grace; the Good News is, so can people like you/me. Amen.