

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word

March 19, 2023

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John 9:13-41

Jesus said to him, “you have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “I believe.” And he worshiped him. (John 9:37-38 N.R.S.V.)

Loving Jesus, Hating the Church

One of my cherished memories of childhood is of my father and the other men and boys of the church standing outside the church door on a Sunday morning, talking together. It was a time to catch up on what was happening with others, to exchange farming tips, and to complain about the weather.

Not everyone went to church back then, but 90% of the people in Helvetia did go to church. At that time there wasn't a lot else to do. Some of them probably went to church just to socialize with their neighbors. But they still went.

These days the situation seems to be reversed. Even though 90% of the people will still tell you they are Christians, there seems to be little concern about external evidence of that. People say they believe in God, but it doesn't seem to translate into changed living or external signs.

As one wag commented about a certain youngster, “He is of the faith, only in as much as the church he doesn't attend is Catholic.”

We make jokes and laugh, but underneath the jokes is a real concern. We are worried about our children and grandchildren who are being lured away by the bright lights of the world. We worry and we wonder, what can we do?

Well, we could be more strict, more insistent about the rules. We could let people know in no uncertain terms how wrong they are and that they need to change. After all, we don't want to be accused of watering down the faith. We are all too aware of the saying of Jesus in Matthew 18:6, “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

Yet, that way has its pitfalls.

In one of my previous churches a young mother, 18 years old, came to church and asked that we

baptize her baby boy. I took this request to the session thinking that this would automatically be approved. It was not.

The session struggled with the fact that this young woman was unmarried and living with the baby's father. Now in baptism, the parents are asked to promise to live the Christian faith and to teach that faith to their child. One of the deeply spiritual women on the session asked how this young mother could fulfill that promise while living in sin? The session decided to tell the young mother to wait until she was either married or living separately. Then bring the baby for baptism.

I am convinced that the session meant this to be a kind of tough love. But it still pains me that I was part of that decision. This young woman heard only condemnation and not love. We never heard from that young mother again. I hope that God was able to draw her back at some point. But it is likely that she became just one more person who loves Jesus and hates the church.

I invite you to look with me now at our text from John 9. Jesus heals a man born blind. Surely this is a good thing. Surely no fault can be found in such an act of mercy and love. And yet, the church manages to do just that.

The problem is that this healing took place on the Sabbath. The leaders of the Jewish church took their role as guardians of God's law very seriously. Instead of giving thanks for this miracle, they focused in on the fact that it was done on the Sabbath.

Now these religious leaders, the pharisees, may have already had it in for Jesus, but they were right about the letter of the law. "Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy - do no work on that day," that was one of the big 10. It was one of the ten commandments that was given to Moses directly from God.

The pharisees were not about to be guilty of watering down the faith. Healing this blind man on the Sabbath was unnecessary work. After all, he had been blind of at least 20 years, what was it going to hurt to wait one more day. The man could have been healed the next and the Sabbath would still have been honored.

The pharisees kicked this man out of their church. Never mind that he had likely been a member of that synagogue since he was a baby. The rules were the rules. Sin was sin. Out he went.

Let me pause for a moment here and examine this whole idea of how we treat those who have sinned. We are afraid that accepting the sinner means that we are endorsing the sin. But is that really true?

How did Jesus deal with great sinners?

Zaccheus was a chief tax-collector in Jerusalem. What he did was unloving, unethical, immoral, greedy, and selfish. He was a very great sinner. Yet, when Jesus saw him in a tree that day,

Jesus not only talked to him, he went to his house for dinner.

Did the fact that Jesus was willing to be seen with and to socialize with this great sinner mean that he was endorsing the awful things that Zaccheus did as a tax collector? The pharisees would have said yes, and Jesus was wrong to eat with sinners. But we who are followers of Jesus believe that his approach was the best one. Jesus is our example.

Jesus did not begin by condemning Zaccheus or his actions. Jesus began by speaking to Zaccheus and inviting himself to dinner. But note something else. The encounter with Jesus changed Zaccheus. Because he first felt accepted and loved, he was able to change.

Jesus did not hesitate to reveal how God wants us to live. In Matthew 5 Jesus says that he came not to destroy the law of God but to fulfill it. In verse 18 Jesus says, “For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”

Jesus did not hesitate to name sin as sin. But the love and the acceptance came first.

When a woman who was caught in adultery is brought before Jesus in John 8, the pharisees think he will have no choice but to condemn her. Jesus refuses to do that. Instead he suggests that whoever is without sin should cast the first stone. When they all slink off with their tails between their legs, Jesus assures the woman that he does not condemn her. Though he does caution her to go and sin no more.

I have no doubt that encounter with Jesus changed this woman who was dragged before him. Genuine encounters with Jesus do that.

In John 3:17 we read, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

I saw something on Facebook the other day pertaining to that verse. It said, “If God did not send Jesus to condemn the world, it is unlikely that he sent you for that purpose.”

Looking back at our text, Jesus seeks out the man who has been kicked out of the synagogue. Jesus reveals his true identity to the man and the man believes. The formerly blind man becomes a follower of Jesus.

Now I want you to note that Jesus never says to this man, you don’t need to have anything to do with those church people from now on - all that is important is you and me. Instead Jesus goes on in the next chapter to talk about his role as the shepherd who gathers the sheep together. When the sheep are gathered together, we call that the church.

The Apostle Paul refers to the church as the body of Christ. The purpose of the various parts of the body are to work together for the good of the whole body.

While my heart goes out to those who have been wounded by the church, it seems that we are

stuck with each other. We may wish that the church were more loving, more pure, more unified. But we are not given the option of turning our backs on the church. No where in scripture will you find it said that the fellowship of other Christians is unimportant. No where in scripture will you ever find it said that the only thing that matters is the relationship between you and God. Scripture spends a lot of time talking about how we relate to one another and support one another. Our relationship with fellow Christians is part of our calling. Yes, it is a messy part of our calling, but it is still part of the challenge.

Perhaps we can start with what we who are already part of the church can do. The pharisees saw themselves as God's bouncers. Their job was to keep out the riffraff. That, however, is not our job.

We are not God's bouncers. We are his ambassadors. Our job is to find a way to introduce others to Christ. People will not be changed because of our condemnation. People will only be changed by encountering Christ. So we don't need to change people. Our job is to bring them to Jesus Christ. He will do the rest.

Amen.