8-30-20 Sermon “Insiders & Outsiders”

So here’s a question that you may or may not have thought of before, or at least lately, and if you want to pause the video and talk about it where you are before continuing, that would be great. When have you felt like an outsider? Take a moment to consider that if you’d like and come back when you’re ready.

**PAUSE**

As I thought about my answer to that question I realized that I have **felt** like an outsider many times in my life; as a child when I changed schools; when I left home to go to college; and throughout my business career with Kmart each time I moved to one of the 13 stores I worked in over 19 years. Even now, as an itinerant clergy person who serves at the pleasure of the Bishop, there is a sense of being an outsider both when going to a new church and when I consider that, as an ordained clergy, I no longer am a member of a local church. Even though I am your pastor I am not a member of Church of the Master - my membership resides in the West Ohio Conference. Strange but true!

I have never felt more like an outsider, though, than the first time I went to El Salvador in 2008. Our group from seminary was made up of about a dozen people, one black male, one Korean male, and the remainder white men and women. When we got off the airplane in San Salvador and began making our way through the airport you could see heads turn and hear conversations in Spanish quiet as our group from *Los Estados Unidos* made their way through the terminal. It was not that they had never seen North Americans before, but a larger group like ours was not common. And with the average Salvadoran standing only 5’ 5” tall, most all of us towered over them as we passed by. I have never felt so conspicuous in my whiteness or in my privilege, and never felt so much like an outsider in my life as I did at that time.

It’s good, though, to get the view from the outside; good to see and experience the world through the lens of an outsider rather than of an insider. In a book I read recently, the author used the illustration of two fish swimming along together in a pond when they meet a third fish swimming the other way. The third fish says to the first two, “How’s the water?” The first fish, confused, turns to the second and asks, “what’s water?” Sometimes, the tale suggests, we are so immersed in a situation, in a state of being, that we can’t see or don’t recognize the situation for what it is - we’re too close, we’re too much on the inside. Perhaps, we’re too comfortable.

In our scripture reading today, Jesus makes a whole lot of church insiders very **uncomfortable**. He’s passing through a town when he sees a tax collector at his booth doing his work. Throughout scripture, when we read about tax collectors, it’s never in a good light, and they are often lumped with others, such as in the phrase, “tax collectors and sinners.” To help us better understand this in context, we might think about the U.S. Internal Revenue Service. Now, you may or may not have a favorable view of the role of the IRS in collecting taxes, but the money **they** collect, at least, is being used to fund U.S. government spending on defense, infrastructure, public assistance programs, or whatever, which again, you may or may not agree with, but that’s not the point. In our passage today, the tax collector Matthew is collecting taxes, not for an Israeli government, but for the Roman government, the occupiers and oppressors of Israel. The money he was collecting was being used to hold down, to subjugate, to put a knee to the throat, if you will, of the very Jewish people who were forced to pay the tax. Furthermore, while the tax collector had to collect a specific amount to pay to the Romans, he was not paid a salary for doing this - he made his living by collecting over and above what had to be paid to Rome in order to support his own family or lifestyle. As one might imagine, this often led to corruption. The tax collector handled money all day long, dirty money that had been touched by farmers, sheep herders, and any number of people whose jobs made them unclean; money that bore the graven image of Caesar and that often bore the inscription “Caesar is Lord.” No, we can imagine that when we hear “tax collectors and sinners” lumped together, the “sinner” is likely the one who took offense.

But Jesus approaches him any way, inviting him to follow. I guess we should be surprised that he agreed, that he got up from his booth and went with this itinerant preacher. I mean, Matthew had to have had a pretty comfortable life, even if his only friends were other tax collectors, or, as the Message version of Matthew’s Gospel referred to them, “other disreputable characters.” Jesus and his disciples go to Matthew’s house for dinner - again, understand the context - he had a house big enough to host an additional dozen or more people **AND** the resources to feed them - in addition to the family and other friends who were there already. He was not struggling from pay check to pay check. And the passage says, “when the Pharisees saw him keeping this kind of company, they had a fit, and lit into Jesus’ followers. ‘What kind of example is this from your Teacher, acting cozy with crooks and riffraff?’” (Mt. 9:11, MSG)

“Crooks and riffraff. Tax collectors and sinners.” Who are **these people** that Jesus is hanging out with? When I was ten years old I was hanging out with some kids from my neighborhood - kids who regularly got into different kinds of mischief - when we got into trouble and the police were called. I remember being led home on my bicycle, trailed by a police car and hearing the officer talking to my mom about getting me into juvenile court. And while nothing ever came of it - I never set foot in court - I wasn’t allowed to play with those kids any more after that. Hanging out with the “wrong” people, the message was, can get you in trouble. I was “scared straight,” as the saying goes, at a very young age.

Jesus, on the other hand, wasn’t worried about what the religious authorities thought about who he was hanging out with. In what almost comes across as a snarky tone, Jesus replies, “Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? Go figure out what this scripture means: ‘I’m after mercy, not religion.’ I’m here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders.” (Mt. 9:12-13, MSG)

That last line of Jesus bears repeating: “I’m here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders.” Hmmm. Jesus is getting a little edgy here. As soon as I read this passage my mind immediately went to the story of the Good Shepherd, who leaves behind the 99 “good” sheep who stayed inside the flock to pursue the 1 sheep who strayed outside of the flock. He’s here to “invite outsiders, not coddle insiders.” The quote from the former Archbishop of Canterbury, that “the church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members” springs to mind as well. And then of course there’s comedian Groucho Marx’s quip that he would never join an organization that would have him as a member. All of this compels us to think about who’s on the inside, who’s on the outside, and what Jesus is calling us to do about that.

If you’re hearing this message, then odds are you are most likely an insider - like I am. You are likely a member or friend of this congregation, having connected formally through membership or informally by participating in one of our ministries like VBS or M&Ms. At the same time, we know from looking at the analytics of our worship videos that we are reaching people who are **not** a part of our physical, in-person congregation, people who have never been inside the four walls of our sanctuary, who some might think of, or who might consider themselves, as outsiders.

And in between those two places, between the inside and the outside, that’s where we find Jesus. Jesus is the connector, the bridge, or if you think back to a message from a couple of weeks ago, he’s the ligament between those on the inside and those on the outside. The message in this passage of Scripture today is **not** that people who don’t follow Jesus are riffraff or sinners or anything like that, the message is that as followers of Jesus our mission is about reaching out to those who are considered outsiders, to be in mission **there,** with **them**, and not to be focusing on what we can do for ourselves, what will comfort us, or what will make us feel better about who we are or what we do. And in some churches that message is readily accepted, while in others…well, not so much.

What happens when people who might be thought of, or think of themselves, as outsiders start to join us on the inside? Well, one thing that happens is that the current insiders have to make room, in all kinds of ways. If they are truly committed to following Jesus, the insiders will have to make room physically. Some “outsider” might sit in your favorite pew, and you’re going to have to welcome them there! Some outsiders might bring fresh ideas, or new ways of thinking or doing things, and the insiders who are committed to following Jesus will have to listen to them, even adapt to them. If the insider hasn’t figured it out yet, following Jesus means being uncomfortable in a lot of things - if you’re not uncomfortable, then you may be following somebody other than Jesus. As the saying goes, “Jesus came to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.” The people we see in worship, in ministry, in our community who somehow make us uncomfortable, are most likely the people we most **need** to have in the church.

Community is integral to Christianity. Offering community to outsiders means that insiders must risk the stability of their community in order for it to expand, to grow. “But I don’t want the church to grow too - I like it just like it is,” some will say; “I don’t want the church to get so big that I don’t know everybody,” countering the very commission of Jesus when he told us to go and make disciples. Offering community to outsiders means doing some things **differently** in order to reach those folks who are not a part of the community. “But we’ve always done it that way!” some proclaim - what I call the Last Seven Words of a Dying Church. To reach those whom Jesus calls us to reach we have to do some things differently - we have to **THINK** differently - sometimes drastically differently.

What many insiders in the church don’t understand - and honestly, it’s a hard lesson to learn, a difficult lesson to accept - is that doing things the way they were done in the 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, even the early 2000s - simply won’t work anymore. Those programs, that “Field-of-Dreams-Build-It-And-They-Will-Come” mindset will not work in the 21st century, when we now have entire generations for whom church has never been a part of who they are or what they do, who see “the church” or “Christians” in the media only through the lenses of the Jerry Falwell scandal, Franklin Graham’s judgmentalism, or Joel Osteen’s prosperity gospel promises, or of churches as being judgmental, irrelevant, and too connected to one political party. The lens through which most people under 40 look at the church in general right now does not provide a flattering view, and the only way to change that perception is to not be **THAT** church, to not sit back as though we “deserve” their devotion or attention simply because that’s how it’s always been. Our challenge isn’t to bring people into our already tightly drawn circles - **they’re not coming** - our challenge is to draw the circle wider, to even draw new circles, and include people who are currently on the outside so that it encompasses all of God’s children, not just the ones who make us feel comfortable, and then to love them.

Matthew 21 tells us that, “Confronted by hostility from the church insiders of his day, the Pharisees, Jesus puts them in their place: even prostitutes and toll collectors will enter the realm of heaven before these enemies, these insiders, if you will, who speak the will of God but do not live it out” (Mt. 21:31-32).[[1]](#footnote-2)

New Testament scholar Greg Carey comments on this passage, writing, “Jesus says the healthy do not need a physician while the sick do, that he has come to call not the righteous but sinners (9:13). Yet Jesus’ companionship with sinners appears to be just that, companionship and not treatment. Jesus has many harsh words to say in the First Gospel, but he directs **none** of them at sinners. His inaugural message is a call to repent (4:17), and he denounces the cities he has visited for failing to repent (11:20-21; 12:41). He pronounces woe against the scribes and the Pharisees (ch. 23). But in the First Gospel Jesus not once reproves sinners. He does not criticize them. He does not demand their repentance. He simply eats and drinks with them.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

How unlike Jesus much of the church has become.

So what are we to do about this? What are we to think about this? How do we respond to Jesus’ charge to be bridge builders, not wall builders? Allow me to just scatter some seeds, if you will, and see what might take root. And again, if you want to stop the video and discuss it around your table, go for it! First of all, I would invite you think about who are the people **you** know, from work, from school, from the bus stop, from the grocery store, from your neighborhood, who are treated as or considered to be outsiders? Can you **identify** the people and places where people are outside the circle? Or how about when we look at our space, at our church building, are there physical barriers that might make another person uncomfortable or feel unwelcome? If so, are there ways we can change or adapt them? This is a pretty formidable looking building from the outside - are there spaces that we could open up to people who are not part of the church to just use and feel welcome here, like for example, our front patio? I’ve seen more people sitting on the benches out there, talking, enjoying coffee, or just sitting quietly over the last few weeks than I have over the last entire year. What if, now that we’ve renewed that space with lovely new landscaping, we expanded the seating available out there and just made it a more inviting space for all people to come and sit, read, pray, or meditate? Otterbein is adding 80 more of those iconic Adirondack chairs around their campus in order to facilitate more safely distanced community building - what if we followed their lead and made our space facing campus feel more welcoming and inviting for folks?

Take a minute to talk about that here if you’d like.

**PAUSE**

One of the things we’re looking at in our Campus Ministry area is how might we better use our connection to the university and the students to build relationships, to build community, to draw the circle wider? We’re looking at what new and innovative things we **could** do, as well as at things that we do now that aren’t really building community and relationship but are simply “the way we have always done it?” So, we’re thinking differently, we’re trying to be innovative in our approach to campus ministry. If you’d like to help with that, especially if you’re an Otterbein grad - reach out to me and let me tell you how you can help build on that innovative spirit.

Jesus didn’t wait for those who were outside the mainstream to come to him, he went where they were. He took the good news directly into the heart of the communities that he visited. So often in the church today, we tend to sit back and wait for those on the outside to come to us. As Bob Dylan famously sang fifty years go, “the times, they are a’changing” In fact, they’ve already changed and changed again, but some in the church just don’t see it, or worse, they deny it.

If this pandemic has taught us anything, it’s that we have to think differently, we have to respond quickly, and we have to be creative in order to have some semblance of normalcy in our lives, to continue to move forward with our kids’ education, and with our careers and work lives. In this time when the rawness of racial injustice is on full display, we have to be compassionate as Christ was compassionate, to bring healing to our own prejudices and those that are built into our systems. Rather than wait for people to come to the church, perhaps the church - both at large and right here on the corner of Grove and Main streets - should follow our neighbors out **into** the world, responding to their needs as they emerge, like Jesus did, with love and compassion.

One issue that comes up regularly in church discussions is about other activities that conflict with “church time.” But what if, rather than complaining that families choose sports or other activities on the weekends, we sought to find new ways to reach out to these young people and their families where they are and provide alternatives ways of building community that work around **their** schedule rather than insisting that they adhere to ours. Or think about this: we have a number of supper clubs in our church - groups that during normal times gather regularly around food and fellowship. During the pandemic I haven’t heard of any of them meeting to care for one another…until now, that is. One supper club is gathering today for a safely distanced picnic in a city park! If you’re in a supper club, is that something you could do? Or in someone’s back yard? And what if you invited someone from outside the church - one of those people I invited you to think about earlier - to join your group, again, safely distanced. And if you’re not in a supper club, why not start one? Or a lunch club, or breakfast club? There are ways to safely engage, to safely tear down walls and build relationships with some who are on the outside, even in the midst of a pandemic, if we just do what Jesus did and think differently.

Being an insider does have its advantages: we’ve seen a lot of things over the years; we’ve heard Jesus’ call to reach out to those on the margins - perhaps more frequently than we would like to. We know the stories of birth, death, resurrection that describe the history and nature of our faith, and we’ve experienced that life, death, and resurrection in numerous ways over the course of our life “on the inside.” But Jesus’ call to us is not to stay safely cocooned inside either our sanctuaries, our homes, or our traditions, his call is to GO! In the immediate aftermath of the crucifixion, when the disciples were hunkered down out of fear, Jesus came to them and told them to GO! They were NEVER to sit and wait, their’s was a charge to **DO**! At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down - not just on the twelve, but on EVERYBODY! The Spirit didn’t contract the circle, but drew the circle wider, ever wider, expanding it exponentially by 3,000 people that day alone. The call in the church, the body of Christ, is never to sit and wait and always to GO and DO, always to reach out more than we reach in, always to include rather than exclude, always to lead with God’s love rather than to cast fear. Or as Jesus put it in our passage today, “to invite the outsiders, rather than coddle the insiders.”

Too often in the church, we prefer to think like that old credit card commercial suggested, “that membership has its privileges.” But I remind you again of the Archbishop’s words that “the church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are **not** its members.” Jesus always focused first on the needs of those outside his circle of friends and followers, always ministered to those outside the circle of the Temple and its rules and regulations. Jesus broke down walls and built bridges in order to take the kin-dom of God out to the people who needed it the most - the least, the last, and the lost - those considered outsiders. We are called - on this day and in this place - to go and do likewise. Amen.

1. Carey, Greg, [WorkingPreacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org)*,* Commentary on Matthew 9:9-13, Accessed 8-24-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)