

“Offending Religious Sensibilities”

Matthew 9:9–13, 18–26

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Some years ago in another setting, we threw a party for a colleague’s fiftieth birthday. Oddly enough, that seemed pretty old back then... so there were all sorts of gag gifts like Geritol and a cane with a side mirror, and several women on staff dressed up like cheerleaders — one had actually been one — and presented cheers written for our aging colleague. It was a bit irreverent, but nothing over the top.

Everyone was laughing and having a good time and I was capturing it all on video when two serious-looking men in gray suits came into the office and immediately looked scandalized. I stopped the video and asked if I could help them. With a mixture of judgment and disappointment, they said they were Gideons and had come to see the pastor. I told them I was the pastor. This did not improve their mood. They seemed to assume that if a proper Christian pastor had been there, all this frivolity would not be taking place.

Several weeks later, I was telling this story to a member of that church, and she quickly nodded knowingly and said, “Well, that explains it.” “It does?” I said. “Yes,” she said, “I met this Gideon last week, and when I told him where I go to church, he said, ‘Oh, we are praying for your church, especially your pastor.’” I appreciate being prayed for, but there is being prayed for and there is *being prayed for*... We had offended these gentlemen’s religious sensibilities, and in their minds, we were headed for the abyss unless we repented.

Now, not all Gideons are killjoys, but the good news for us is that we were in good company. Jesus has plenty of people praying for him in this way, we might say preying on him, people who criticize him because he offends their religious sensibilities. Sometimes it is because he allows too much frivolity. He goes to dinner parties and wedding feasts, changes water into wine, he is not a killjoy. Other times it is because he violates some Sabbath rule that is not in scripture but has

cropped up over time and become sacred. But most often it is because he is too inclusive in terms of who he spends time with, welcomes and affirms, even calls to leadership roles.

Today's reading from Matthew is but one of many examples of this reality. As the story begins, Jesus sees a man named Matthew sitting at the tax booth and calls him to follow him. It is in the imperative mood which is to say Matthew is voluntold. It is almost a command. Then, Jesus has dinner with the man along with other tax collectors, sinners, and his disciples. None of this seems unusual, Jesus has not attended a drag show, but in this context, he might just as well have done so.

Tax collectors are despised. We don't love the IRS, but these folks not only work for the oppressor, the Romans, they sometimes demand extra money, and they are considered to be immoral. The tax booth is an office of sorts set up near the water so that as fisherman come off Lake Galilee, they pay a tax on their catch because the fish belong to Rome.

For Jesus to hang out with these people and other sinners, break bread with them, an intimate act of affirmation, welcome them into his presence, is scandalous. It's not what proper people of faith do, much less a rabbi. But to make one of them some kind of leader, as Jesus does Matthew, is beyond redemption! "What is Jesus doing?" the Pharisees ask, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Jesus has an answer, as he does every time religious authorities challenge his radical inclusivity. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." In other words — these are the very people for whom I have come, they need me. Then, he tells them to reflect on an ancient teaching found in Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." God is about mercy and love, not judgment and exclusion. God longs to embrace and redeem all God's children.

But for the most part, the people Jesus offends just don't get it. They are too stuck in their ways to hear a new word, even if it is God's word, because they think they already know God's mind and what God wants is for them to separate the good people from the bad and stay away from the latter. Their religious sensibilities at this point are easily offended, but Jesus really offends them.

So, whose religious sensibilities have we offended? It's not that we want to offend anyone. It's just that faithfulness to Jesus inevitably provokes offense because people's religious sensibilities are not always God's or Christ's. Some people are offended by frivolity. They assume that God is against anything that looks like it might be fun. We enjoy life enough here to unsettle them. Others value highly a long list of additions to sacred teachings. Blue Laws and Sabbath rules are no longer pervasive, but there are things that in the minds of some, Christians just don't do, like drink wine, which means Jesus isn't a Christian. But how we get other religious people riled up most is the same way Jesus does, by being too inclusive, by welcoming the "wrong" people.

In one setting where I served, we had an after-school program with a huge number of children. Because the neighborhood was racially diverse, the pool of children was also. And the church embraced all of this — working with the children, helping them learn, connecting with the community. It was a central mission of the church, very much like our clothing ministry. But then, I did the unspeakable. I invited these children and their families to come to church with us — Sunday School, worship, Wednesday Night Supper. That wouldn't do, it was too intimate, *we* didn't break bread with *them*. The vestiges of segregation were still there, so they found mixing races even at church offensive.

Welcoming LGBT people is anathema to many too. Church after church and denomination after denomination has struggled with the tension created by seeking to include this part of "all people." In this time of cultural reversion, many still hold to a flat-earth view of sexuality. Their eyes and ears are closed to any new revelation of science or scripture. They are willing to legislate their biases, and any church that welcomes and affirms *those* people is offensive to them and God, they claim, as they elevate to the highest priority something Jesus never said a word about, though he said a lot about love and inclusion.

But while following Jesus' pattern of radical inclusivity can prove offensive in regard to race and identity, we can cause just as much trouble by crossing socioeconomic lines. Friends in another setting were horrified by something their child said during a children's sermon. They are dangerous things, children's sermons, especially if you ask

questions. During a children's sermon on being friendly to new people, the minister asked the children if we welcome everyone. "Yes, of course," they said. The minister asked about several groups of people we might welcome. "Yes," they said. Then, the minister said, "What if they don't dress as nicely as us?" to which this family's child said, "No."

The minister tried to coax a further word from the child, but the child repeated, "No, if they don't dress like us, they can't come!" The congregation laughed, I suspect partly because the parents were always dressed just so with every hair in place. The child reflected what she experienced, even if it had never been verbalized, and we can be sure that anyone not able to match the dress code at that church would get the message. Welcoming people from different backgrounds to come as they are inevitably rubs some people the wrong way.

But it's not just that Jesus welcomes everyone, he invites people others consider unworthy into his inner circle of leadership, like Matthew the tax collector who becomes one of the twelve. So, if we are to follow Jesus' pattern of radical inclusion, we will be willing to risk offense not only by whom we welcome, but by whom we include as leaders.

For some people, the simple fact that we ordain women as deacons and ministers is offensive. I have shared with some of you Mary Barham's story of going back to her home church on Deacon Ordination Sunday. They still do not ordain women, but Mary was ordained here. So, when ordained people were invited to participate in the laying on of hands, Mary did, creating quite a scandal. The next time she was there on that Sunday, when she started to get up, the minister looked at her sternly and shook his head "No!" Apparently he even warned his successor about her because when she was there a third time on Deacon Ordination Sunday, the minister she had never met shook his head.

Some churches are more selective than God about who they allow into leadership. God calls Moses who has committed murder. God calls David who checks just about every box of depravity. In Matthew's lineage of Jesus, there are four women, a departure from the norm in and of itself, all of whom are viewed to have done something unacceptable.

God calls women and men, young and old, on Pentecost, but many churches are pickier. Is it any wonder the church is struggling?

I think of an old Fred Craddock story about the church he served as a young man in a small town in Tennessee. A new industry came to town, bringing with it a trailer park of new workers. He tried to persuade the church to reach out to those workers, saying they needed community and the church needed people, but the townspeople refused. They are not like us, they said.

Years later, renowned homiletics professor Fred Craddock returned to town and he was thrilled to see the church parking lot full. He went inside and every pew was packed. Of course, it had become a barbecue restaurant. The church had died years before. And Fred says he thanked God it had died because if it was still that church, most of the people in the room would not have been welcome.

It is a sobering story with a penetrating truth. Some religious sensibilities need to be offended because they don't square with God's sensibilities or Christ's. There will be resistance and criticism from the protectors of the status quo. It comes with the territory called discipleship. But if it means everyone has a place and a voice, as Jesus desires, it is worth the trouble.