

“Who Does God Call?” based on Matthew 9:9-17 and Psalm 35

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, June 11, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

One of my favorite trends in recent years has been a renewed emphasis on cooking from scratch. How many of you out there have, or have had, some sourdough starter? My wife started making sourdough when we were living in seminary, and our neighbor next door gave her some starter and his instructions.

Now, I had worked in a bakery for a wonderful local grocery store, but my experience was with 50lb bags of flour, scoops, and big blocks of fresh yeast, not measurements in grams and milliliters and the daily feeding of starter. I tried to apply my knowledge to her process, thinking that I was helping her make the bread. But unfortunately, we had to ask for more starter from the neighbor more often than I'd like to admit.

The truth was, I was trying to apply a new patch to an older piece of cloth. What she was trying to do predated the methods I used in the bakery where I worked. After all, we made sourdough bread there too – from a mix. It was a pre-packaged 50lb bag that made the bread taste sour, but only through the brilliance of food scientists. Sure, some of the things I could help with, but on the whole, my contributions only made the challenge harder.

Over the years, Claire has moved away from the old neighbor's methods, mixed in some input from some of the flour companies and their advice, and has even utilized the advice of some of you whom she has talked to here. In the end, she has created her own new wine in a fresh wineskin. It is something that is her own, still very back to basics in essence. This is great for us because the kids and I get homemade quality bread.

Now for those of you who make your own sourdough, you may look at her process and her product, just as she may look at yours, and find it very different from your own. It is in essence the same wine, but to put it in your wineskin, it would burst.

I love the back-to-basics aspect of this because this is an art that is lost in our culture. The grocery store in which I had worked through college considers itself high-end or specialty, but I assure you they are not cranking out hundreds of loaves of sourdough now by using starter cultivated how Claire does it or how you do it. The fact is that we live in a culture that is rapidly changing, and little things like this are one way way of putting our foot down, and restoring a piece of good ol' time gone by. Cooking with whole foods and fresh ingredients is something our culture has needed since the promise of convenience has, it seems, pervaded every aspect of our lives.

Yet, Claire's methods or any of the methods you may use, truly lack authenticity even still. Even our neighbor, who began his starter, using only stone-ground organic flour, which he then put outside to collect wild yeast, feeding it with filtered water. Even he cannot reproduce the bread from ancient times in his kitchen. The fact is that he is not collecting his own grain, nor milling it. He's buying it. And his water comes from sanitary public water systems, not the local stream, and his oven, his cookware, are all relatively modern inventions. Change is inevitable, and many changes, particularly the water in this instance, are often for the better.

Yet it is often this inevitable change that is the source of our consternation today, just as it was in the time of Jesus, when the Pharisees and John's disciples each questioned Jesus and the

innovations they perceived in his ministry. Both groups are troubled by an upset to the natural order of things, or at least, what they perceive the natural order should be. And in John's disciples, there is an obvious jealousy expressed, and in the Pharisees, it is more subtly expressed, but for each, Jesus challenges their whole identity.

For John's disciples, they have been proving their faithfulness with austere living. John famously wore camel hair garments – this is not clothing associated with comfort. What's more, he sustained himself on eating insects (locusts) and wild honey, the first being rather disgusting, the second being risky to obtain. The disciples living with John likely ate, drank, and lived as John did, proving their mission by the extreme way they lived. So, while John's disciples lived this way, Jesus's didn't. Later in Matthew, Jesus says John refused alcohol, but Jesus and his disciples did not and the Pharisees around them judged each for their actions.

Jesus's response is not a statement about the value of fasting or the choices of John's disciples or those of the Pharisees. This is a statement of his own identity as Immanuel, or "God with us," as the bridegroom, the one with whom the community of God's chosen have made their covenant. He is the one through whom this covenant will be renewed and extended to the world.

The "children of the bridal chamber" is the literal translation and that is what is in the King James Version, but in many other translations it is often rendered as guests. However, these are the members of the bridal party, the ones who will prepare the bridal chamber for the consummation of the marriage later. So, then the disciples are those who will go out and prepare the world around for the covenantal relationship with him.

All three synoptic gospels place talk John's disciples after the challenge from the Pharisees, who try to undermine Jesus's authority with his own disciples, saying to them, "*For what reason does your teacher eat with the tax collectors and the sinners?*" And it seems fitting that when Jesus overhears this and responds to them by quoting Hosea, a very difficult testament text, in which the prophet is told by God to marry woman who will be unfaithful to him. Hosea's struggle to love and stay in covenant with her despite this. His relationship represents God's covenant with Israel.

Both the Pharisees and John's disciples want to represent the real people of Israel, and anyone who believes or acts differently than they do is a "repugnant cultural other." This stranger term is not in the text but was coined by anthropologist Dr. Susan Friend Harding. It is meant to describe any group within our culture which we find repugnant, not because they are so different from us, but close enough to us, to be more of a threat than some far off different culture. In other words, some far off cannibal offends us less, than someone with different political views who may hang a flag we don't like, cover their car in bumper stickers we don't agree with, and vote in the same election.

In truth, that second example usually raises more judgement and concern from us, than the person in a distant culture of a distant land who becomes an item of curiosity. So it is for John's disciples, who believe they are on the same side as Jesus, but now they question if Jesus is with them, since his disciples don't fast. The Pharisees and their teachings are more like Jesus's than different. In truth, the movement of Jesus represents a bigger change for the Sadducees, Essenes, Herodians and Zealots, than it does for the Pharisees themselves. But for them, some lines cannot be crossed.

If someone who preaches faithfulness and observance of the Word of God like a Pharisee, then seeks to include the tax collectors and the sinners in his circle, he must be a false teacher to avoid,

because the Pharisees avoid sinners, like the plague. But Jesus is associating with a traitor – a tax collector for the Romans – and that tax collector invited him to dinner with other tax collectors, and others easily identified by the Pharisees as sinners.

Jesus does not deny that he is eating with sinners – those who are strong, or healthy, he says, have no need of a physician, unlike those who are sick, a word that literally in the Greek means to be in misery. What Jesus denies is the exclusionary behavior of the Pharisees. He does this using Hosea, as if to say, the Israel of scripture has always turned its back on God, but God has always been faithful to these sinners who need God's love most.

Indeed, Jesus says, "I desire mercy not sacrifice," which in the Hebrew would have been, I desire 'chesed,' the nearly indefinable word meaning steadfast and merciful love. It means the love of a God who never forsakes or gives up on those who are loved, always choosing to stay in covenant, even with those who are unfaithful. Jesus says he did not come to call those who are just, but came for sinners. This is not because Jesus does not desire us to do justice and be righteous, but because we all fall short, so mercy, covenant faithful love, should be our priority. Our priority cannot be proof of our goodness in sacrifice. Indeed, God's love comes first and religiosity, as good as that can be, doesn't earn it. Our actions should be, instead, a response to it.

My sisters and brothers, when Jesus calls Matthew he is at the tax booth where he works, and without admonition, without conditions, he says to him, "Come follow me." Jesus calls Matthew to walk with him, and Matthew rises up to do so, and even goes and invites his friends to come meet Jesus with him. Matthew is hated – He is supporting the Roman oppression, or at least that's how the Pharisees and John's disciples, along with everyone else, would have perceived him. He is everyone's repugnant cultural other. He sides with the Romans but is still a Jew. He is Jewish, but sides with Rome. No one likes him, but it's a job.

How many people do we judge because of their occupation? Their political allegiance? Who is your repugnant other? Is there anyone who is outside of God's love? Who is the tax collector in your eyes? Who is the sinner we need to avoid? Who is corrupting our youth? Who is changing our world? Who is beneath us, not as good as we are?

Friends, we cannot stop change by putting the current day and its new wine into old wineskins, but we also cannot be beholden to change without question, putting new cloth onto the tears in old cloth, or else we will just make everything worse. There has to be a balance instead, like the positive trend of getting back to basics with food, but we must acknowledge that no matter how 'rustic' we make it, it's different and new. We don't worship the way we did in the first century.

And that's ok, because the God who created all things and called it good is the same God who is making all things new, or renewed, or fresh, inviting us to share in that work through merciful and steadfast love. We cannot make the sourdough of old, but we can be faithful to the traditions of old, and the teachings of old, and do new things, empowered by the Spirit.

The one who made all things and established a covenant with Abraham, and with Israel, is the one who shared in our humanity to fulfill these covenants, not destroy them. Jesus, who is the eternal Son of God in our flesh, gives us a new, renewed, and fresh covenant through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. By this we are made temples of God's eternal Spirit. Just as the Son shared in our life, the Spirit now shares God's life with us, in and among us, in relationship.

As the Psalm says, God “fashions our hearts individually, and considers all of our works,” because in truth, worldly power of horses (for chariots and battle) are false, and multitudes of armies cannot save us. Jesus came to us to be our savior, to be our physician and all of us – every single one of us, especially me – are in need of his care. The good news is that God’s word proclaims God’s love for us as faithful and merciful, most evident in the incarnation of Jesus and his saving life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

The Lord sees all who hope in this steadfast and merciful love and promises to rescue your life, your soul, promises to rescue your whole being from death, asking that you and I, all of us, respond to this love, to the mercy God has shown each of us, by showing mercy and love for others.

Let us then be like Jesus and rather than cast off the repugnant cultural other, we can choose to embrace the one who we disagree with and see God’s image in them. This we can do over matters of politics or sourdough recipes just the same. We are called to love as Jesus loves, because he came to love and to call the sinners. He came to love and to call every one of us first. Amen.