

## **“Saved For Association” based on Mark 2:13-22 and Psalm 62**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on January 21, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Two weeks ago, we read the calling of four fishermen, Andrew and Peter, James and John, in which Jesus said, “Come follow me,” and “I will make you fishers of people.” Last week, we read about when Jesus called Philip and Nathaniel. In this reading, Nathaniel who was skeptical of his friend Philip’s invitation, said, “What good could come of Nazareth.” But still, he gave in when Philip said, “Come and see.” And so, he met Jesus, who said he saw Nathaniel before, “Underneath the fig tree.” This led us to wonder, what did Jesus see that this simple statement could turn the skeptic into someone who believed.

Now, we have the calling of a tax collector into the ranks of Jesus’s disciples. If you’ve heard one sermon on this text, you likely already know that a tax collector was not a person of high esteem among his fellow country people. Employed by the Roman occupying forces to extract funds for the empire, a tax collector was viewed as a traitor, and what’s more, tax collectors were not paid directly for their work. They made their money by charging extra, over and above what the Roman tax would be. Then they would share from that with the Roman soldiers too, who were their muscle. If they were not going to be respected, at least they could be rich.

In this scene in Mark, Luke and Matthew, the religious leaders don’t confront Jesus. Notice that they confront the disciples of Jesus, trying to undermine Jesus’s credibility. The disciples were with Jesus when he called Levi, who is also known as Matthew, and they surely know that they are eating in the home of a tax collector. They knew.

But then these particular scribes come playing a game, attacking Jesus’s reputation, trying to shame the disciples into leaving their teacher. “Why does YOUR teacher eat with tax collectors? Why does YOUR teacher eat with sinners?” It’s as if they are saying, “You don’t have to be defined by this guy. You can walk away now, and your reputation, your honor, your esteem, will remain intact, even grow.”

They are preying on a struggle we all have as human beings, namely the anxiety we feel when we are trying to manage perceptions. We all want to be well regarded, respectable in some fashion. We want to have some control over our reputation with others. Yet, as the branding expert Marty Neumeier puts it, “Your brand is not what you say it is. No, it’s what they say it is.” A company’s brand, a church’s, even our personal brand, is the gut feeling others have about us.

Up until this point in Mark’s gospel, the people have a good gut feeling about Jesus. He has been baptized by the popular John the Baptist and now he is proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God. He has exorcised demons and healed the sick all while teaching everywhere he goes. Surely his reputation is growing, after all, miracles offer great publicity. But now, he goes and calls a tax collector to “Come follow me.” And if that wasn’t bad enough, he goes to his house, and there are more tax collectors and others who have publicly known sins, and yet, Jesus is reclined at their table, relaxed, eating food and drinking wine with them.

Warren Buffet once said, “It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.” Well, you know what: Jesus is not thinking about that. He didn’t do things differently. Jesus is ready to squander all of his reputation, his credibility, his everything, on one dinner with a tax collector and his friends, all public sinners. And so, when these

scribes try to draw his disciples away, Jesus instead confronts them, reminding them that, “The healthy have no need of a physician, but rather those who have afflictions.” The sick need doctors.

In confronting these scribes, Jesus reminds his disciples of why he is even with them in the first place. Jesus is proclaiming the kingdom of God, not to build his own reputation and esteem, but to be a force for restoration, healing, and the new creation of making all things new again. This is not a departure then from what Jesus had been doing. Rather, it is a continuation – He has been exorcising demons, healing illness, and now he’s eating with those people who are defined by their sins, judged by the world as unworthy of attention, especially the attention of so-called holy people.

Notice that Jesus does not make excuses, explaining away the sins of those he dines with. He accepts that yes, they may be sinners, but they still warrant his love and attention. Long before Jesus will tell his disciples that he did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many, Mark shows us Jesus, doing just this – serving the possessed, the sick, the marginalized, and giving his life, his love, his reputation even, to do so.

This is the most complete image of God we have – Jesus. And this means, this image is associating with outcasts. Doing so, requires bravery. It requires humility too, and vulnerability.

There are lots of motivations people might have to reach out to people on the margins. There are those who may be gifted naturally in their personalities to be border stalkers. Like Aragorn in the Lord of the Rings, they are able to go from one group to another, being able to communicate and connect with people in every group. That’s amazing, but that can get lonely at times. People in that position like Aragorn can get fatigued and wonder if it’s worth it, running out of energy.

Then there are those with a real heightened sense of justice, who can say, “That’s wrong and I’m going to stand up to it!” That’s awesome. It’s amazing. But what happens when your anger fades or you get bored, tired. How do you get the steam back when it’s all run out?

Maybe you see something that matters to you and it’s under attack. You step up because there’s a culture war to be won. Great. Amazing. You’re standing up for something that matters. But you take the fight to the streets, and maybe your side wins. Maybe you lose. Now what? That’s over. You’ve got to keep fighting and so you do. Suddenly winning becomes the game and not the principles.

There are probably many more ways I can describe for us to be motivated to do what’s right. That’s great, but all of them fade. That’s the difference between the Kingdom of God and worldly reasons we might choose to do what’s right. The one who made all things and has no reason to concede anything to us. God is good and we are sinners. There is no need on God’s part to reconcile with us. God probably could just punish us, but instead God comes down and shares in our humanity and lives our life. Jesus died for us and rose for us. This was not because God needed anything from us, but because we are loved by God.

That’s the difference. If we truly believe God shared in our humanity, and eternal life is not seen as a reward but an opportunity to do what’s right without fear of what other people say, then it’s no longer about reputation or honor, but trusting in a God who has our back. God longs for us to be a part of making this world a better place, not for our glory but for God’s.

We’re not saved on this side for heaven alone, but empowered by the Spirit to do God’s will. This not one of those situations where we sit back and say, “Well, I’m part of this group and we don’t do

this sort of thing. We reach out to the insiders.” Well, do you reach out to those in the other group who don’t do what you do?

One of the biggest problems in the world is that we take sides in our ideology rather than uniting in our faith. Our Christian world is divided between those who think, “We’re the ones who get it,” against those who say the same thing, but stand in opposition to us. What if we talked to each other more and saw humanity in one another more. What if we reached out across every boundary – political, ideological, educational, racial, ethnic, socio-economical – and sat shoulder to shoulder with one another. What if we did this not as “us vs. them,” but as “us for them.”

That’s what Jesus is doing here with the tax collectors and the public sinners. He’s sitting shoulder to shoulder with them. He’s already God in their humanity and now with those the rest of the culture wants to reject, he sits side by side, reclining at table, eating with them, and showing them that they matter and are loved.

The good news of the Kingdom of God is not about fear, but fearlessness because of Jesus. We are able to do what is right because God is with us and has our back. We don’t have to worry about who we are reaching out to and what others will think. We can share the love of God freely for the ministry of reconciliation. Think about those who might be “tax collectors” or “public sinners” in your eyes. Think also of yourself and how you might be marginalized at times. Then remember that with Christ, God in our flesh, you have a seat at the table to love because you are loved. Amen.