

Guess They'll Let Anyone in Here

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Springridge Mennonite Church (Pincher Creek)

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My son Nick has a thing for dad jokes.

You're familiar with this category? The "dad joke" typically super-cringey and lame. It's a joke or an expression, typically delivered by a middle-aged dude, well past his prime, who still, pitifully imagines himself to be funny or relevant.

A few examples (these are the kinds of things my son will share with the family from time to time):

What happens when a frog's car dies?

He needs a jump. If that doesn't work he has to get it toad.

Why did the scarecrow win an award?

Because he was outstanding in his field.

Why did the invisible man turn down the job offer?

He couldn't see himself doing it.

Those of you who laughed at these jokes are officially irrelevant and should know that everyone under 25 is embarrassed by you. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news. Don't shoot the messenger. ☺

Anyway, this week I came across not really a dad *joke* per se, but something in the general category of "pitiable things that dads say." I'm not on Twitter but someone who is sent this my way:

Dads love saying "Guess they'll let anyone in here" when they see a friend in public.

Do I dare ask if anyone in the room has said this? If you haven't said it, maybe you've heard it. I certainly have,

Apparently, the phrase has some sketchy origins. It harkens back to "exclusive" establishments like the old-world "men's clubs" where class was important to membership. Places where a banker would fit right in, but a coal miner would be turned out on his heels.

In our context, "guess they'll let anyone in here" doesn't carry the same connotations of overt prejudice. We usually hear it when someone is playfully greeting a friend or acquaintance when coming across them in some public setting.

It's a kind of disarming, jokey expression, even if, as mentioned, also officially cringey and unacceptable because it's something "dads" say.

At any rate, I saw the phrase this week and thought, "this is essentially the critique of Jesus being made by the Pharisees in today's gospel reading."

"I guess he'll let anyone in" or "I guess he'll eat with anyone."

But in Matthew's gospel, there's nothing jokey about it. It's not a backhanded compliment or expression of affection. The Pharisees are deadly serious.

Let's set the stage. Jesus has just called Matthew to be his disciple. Matthew is a tax collector. This is a problem.

Tax collectors would have been social outcasts among Jews in Jesus' time because they were seen as collaborators with the Roman imperial authorities.

They were Jews who not only collected taxes for their people's oppressors, but who also made their margin of profit by collecting more than was legally due.

This is who Jesus calls to be his disciple.

And now, no sooner does Jesus call Matthew to follow him than he's hanging out with Matthew's friends, breaking bread with the social and moral outcasts of the day.

This Jesus clearly has no standards, no sense of decency or propriety. He doesn't care about moral standards or purity. How could he possibly be a prophet or a man of God?

I think it's important for us not to write this reaction off as "just one of those inexplicable things that 'those Pharisees' thought or did in bible times." *They just never seem to get it.*

The Pharisees often function as caricatured villains in our biblical imaginations, but their reactions aren't so foreign to what ours might have been.

If you want to get a small sense of how Jesus' behaviour might have been perceived by the upstanding religious folks of his day, think of a group of people you are most scandalized or outraged by.

Got a picture in your head?

Now imagine me (or Tany) ditching the potluck after this service (or our MCA pastors council next Wednesday) to go hang out with them at the bar or the casino.

I could be wrong, but I dare say there might a grumble or two. 😊

"Be careful the company you keep," we often tell our kids. And there's a measure of truth to this, right? Who you hang out with influences you, for good or for ill.

I serve as a part-time chaplain at the Lethbridge Correctional Centre, and I see this all the time. A lot of the guys really want to clean up their lives and make a new start, but they often say something like, "As soon as I get out, my only connections are my old friends. I don't have anyone else. And before long, I'm using, I'm back to my old ways."

So, the Pharisees aren't crazy to be suspicious about this Jesus and the company he keeps. Aside from this basic feature of how human beings rub off on one another, they have been steeped in a whole religious system that has taught them that sin is like a contaminant.

The entire Jewish sacrificial system operated on the assumption that ritual purity mattered deeply. Contact with the wrong things and the wrong people could leave you defiled, according to many at the time.

Sin was like a disease. It could be “caught,” in some ways. It needed to be avoided at all costs.

Lines needed to be kept very clear and clearly defined. There were “sinners” and “righteous” and the blurring of boundaries was not welcome.

This was the social and religious world in which Jesus sat down at a table with tax collectors and sinners.

Now, we might be tempted to think, “Well, that was then, this is now. Thank God we’ve moved beyond that rigid and binary way of looking at the world! Thank God we don’t just divide the world between ‘those sinners’ and ‘us righteous people’ anymore.”

But then we might open our newspapers. Or watch TV. Or go on social media. And we quite quickly realize that even though we might not use the word “sin” or “sinners” as much as people in Jesus’ day did (or as much as Jesus himself did), these categories are very much alive and well in our time, too.

Condemnation of sin pours forth daily from our various source of media, whether it’s directed at sins related to race or sexuality or gender identity embracing the wrong politics or social causes or failing in some other way to think rightly and sufficiently about the right issues with the right combination of guilt and sensitivity and outrage and commitment to “do better” and publicly brand ourselves as appropriately moral citizens.

I have a lot of conversations these days about the anger and polarization that seems to be everywhere in our culture.

People seem to be really, *really* annoyed and really, *really* determined to sort people into the categories of “righteous” and “unrighteous” according to where they stand on issues.

No, we have not even remotely abandoned the concept of sin in our culture.

We are certainly selective in how, when, and to whom we apply it. But we still quite clearly believe that it is real and that it deserves judgment.

What we need is to see that sin is not just something that affects “those people” whose views we don’t share or whose behaviour we don’t appreciate, but all of us.

Much as we like to think that we’re basically decent people who just need a bit of self-help or inspirational religion or sensitivity training or an unconscious bias workshop, things are actually worse than we like to imagine.

Jesus put it like this:

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick... I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

As I mentioned to our congregation last Sunday, I don’t think Jesus was telling the Pharisees that they were “righteous” and unaffected by the same things as those tax-collectors and sinners.

It’s not as though Jesus was telling them, “Now, you righteous Pharisees just stand over there and be patient while I deal with these sinners over here, and then once that’s done, I’ll come over and hang out with you (I might even give you a prize for your moral performance).

I think Jesus was quite clearly saying that we are *all* in the category of “sinner.”

In John 9, after healing a man born blind, we read these words:

Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’⁴¹ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains (John 9:39-41).

Jesus is clearly saying that those who recognize and acknowledge their sin are more honest about the human condition than those who imagine they are immune.

I want to spend our remaining time on five words Jesus speaks that we could (and probably should) spend the rest of our lives pondering and living into.

“Go and learn what this means,” he says: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

This is something that, sadly, we have not learned as well as we should have by now.

As I’ve said, we live in a culture where the concepts of “sin” and “sinner” and “repentance” and even “penance” are alive and well, even if we don’t always use that language. Our culture has borrowed these categories from Christianity, even it isn’t always great at acknowledging its debts.

But while our culture has unwittingly preserved some of these religious categories, the one crucial piece of the Christian framework that we have mostly left behind, is mercy.

We are far better at judging and condemning and “cancelling” than showing mercy.

What does Jesus mean when he says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice?”

“Mercy,” we understand, even if we aren’t always very good at extending it. But what about “sacrifice?”

Well, I think Jesus is referring to Israel’s sacrificial system. Historically, an animal had to be sacrificed for sin, whether a goat, a dove, a ram, whatever. It varied according to the nature of the sins committed.

But the idea was, we’ll put all our sin, our guilt, our shame, our contamination, our impurity... all of it on *this thing*, and that’s where we’ll park the blame. That’s where the judgment will go.

This is the logic of the system.

The scapegoat is the most obvious example of this. In Leviticus 16, we read that a goat would be sent into the wilderness after the Jewish chief priest had symbolically laid the sins of the people upon it. The sin would be removed from the camp.

And, again, while the specific practices might sound strange to our ears, we do the same today. The scapegoating instinct is alive and well in our time.

We’ve just been through an election here in Alberta. I lost track of the number of times in the buildup when I heard something like, “all the problems our province is facing is

those people's fault," whether "those people" were godless, wicked liberal socialists, or bigoted, right-wing capitalist climate-change deniers" or whatever.

There's always a "those people" where we want to park the blame. Those ignorant fools who can't see reason. Those greedy corporate pawns who lack compassion. Those *sinners*.

The impulse to sacrifice for sin is alive and well. Our altars and our offerings just look different.

To us, just like to the religious leaders of Jesus' time, Jesus says...*Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy and not sacrifice.*

And then Jesus enacts what he says.

A desperate religious leader comes to him. His daughter has died. *Jesus, can you help?*

On the way to this man's house, Jesus encounters a desperate woman who has been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years reaches out for him. *If I can just touch his cloak, I'll be healed,* she thinks.

Interestingly, just like many of the people believed that contact with sin could ritually contaminate, so it seems that many people already believed that contact with Jesus could purify, cleanse, and heal.

Jesus looks at her, and what does he say? "Why didn't you go to the temple and offer sacrifices for the sins that led to your condition?"

No, he says, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well.

He goes to the house of the synagogues leader's dead daughter. The funeral rituals have already begun. What does he do? Does he avoid contact with the dead body (which would have made him ritually unclean)?

No, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up.

In both cases, mercy, not sacrifice.

Jesus does an amazing two-fold thing in our gospel text this morning.

1. He tells us a hard but *crucial* truth. You're all sinners. Every single one of you. You don't get to divide the world into "good people like me" and "bad people where I can park the blame."
2. He shows us God's heart for sinners. He doesn't condemn, he sits down at the table. *Guess he'll eat with anyone...* He heals. He brings back to life. He shows that mercy trumps sacrifice.

This is a gift. We need both of these.

Last Monday, I was at the jail. We had finished our bible study and it was prayer time. I always ask for requests, and the usual things popped up.

Pray for my girlfriend, my kids, my mom. Pray for peace on the unit. Pray for my upcoming court date. Pray that I get outta here soon.

Into the midst of all these quite pragmatic concerns, one guy with his head down quietly said, "Forgiveness. Pray that I can be forgiven for the things that I've done." And everyone got really quiet. And a lot of heads started nodding.

And I was so grateful to be part of a tradition and a living faith that gave me accurate truth-telling language and the robust theological categories to speak into this need.

Where we sinners could pray, "Please, God, forgive us our sins" and where I could say to this dear sinner, "Your sins are forgiven."

This is the gift of the gospel. And it is available to all the sinners and saints from Springridge and Lethbridge Mennonite Church this morning, too.

Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice.

May God help us toward this end. Amen.

Amen.

