

“No Resume Required”
Luke 5:27-32
3rd Sunday after Epiphany

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Westminster, Greenville
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Our text for today is about connection.

How we reach out to others,
how we connect with others,
the hospitality we show to others—
it is all central to our text for today.

Luke writes:

Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them.

The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”

Now—it’s easy to beat up on the Pharisees in this text.
To point the finger and sit in judgment of the scribes in this text.

How could they be so callous?
How could they be so conceited?

But I want to begin today by inviting you to think of a time, or moment, or some event in your life in which...you really did NOT want to be connected to someone else.

No relationship, no friendship, and you were just fine with that boundary.

For example, in the months after I graduated from seminary, but before I started my first call in Texas, I spent some time living with my cousin in Washington, DC.

One Thursday night there was a knock at the door.

I opened it, and two well-dressed young men were standing there. "Hello. We'd like to talk to you about Jesus Christ."

Now I don't remember what church they were from, but I do remember telling them, "Thank you, but I'm Presbyterian, I know about Jesus."

And I started to close the door, but one of them stepped in a little closer, his eyes growing wide, and he said, "That's wonderful! We'd love to talk with you about Jesus!"

I was a little taken aback, and said, "Thanks, but actually, I'm a minister, I'm about to move to Dallas to start working at a church, and I really don't have time right now."

Then the other one sidled inside the doorway and said, "Have you been saved?"

Well, I was doing my best to be polite, but I looked at my watch...this is during the late '90s when "Must See TV" was on NBC, and it was 8:58pm, so I said to my unexpected visitors:

"I'm sorry, but *Seinfeld* is coming on in two minutes,
and I really don't want to miss it."

To which the first guy replied:

"So, do you love *Seinfeld* more than Jesus Christ?"

And I looked at him.

And I said: “Absolutely!”
 And I slammed the door in their face.

Clearly, not the most hospitable thing for me to do.
 Why did I do it?
 I did it...because I had no desire to be connected with them.

Today’s text is about connection.
 How we connect with others.
 The hospitality to others.
 Who we reach out to and make friends with in our world...and
 who we reach out to and connect with in our own church.

How many of you have heard me say before that one of things I
 prize most about our congregation is that we’re a PURPLE church?

Red and blue, Democrat and Republican, together in the same
 sanctuary.

Do you know why that’s important to me?

Not just because every church I’ve ever served has been purple.

Not just because I believe that one of the signs of faithful
 commitment to Christ is to gather in a sanctuary with people who share a
 deeper commitment than partisan political affiliation.

I prize being a purple church because it’s similar to what Jesus did
 when he called the first disciples.

Today’s text is about the call of Levi.
 But if you go on to chapter 6 in Luke, you get a list of the 12:

There's Peter and Andrew. James and John.
 Philip and Bartholomew.
 Thomas and James, son of Alphaeus.
 And Simon, "who was called the Zealot."

Stop right there.

Simon the Zealot, as his name implies, would have been zealous about maintaining Jewish law.

And Levi was a tax collector, earning his living in a manner that was anathema to Jewish law. He was taking money from his own people and giving it to the WRONG people, the Roman government, he's in cahoots with the enemy.

Do you see what Jesus was doing?
 He put them both together.
 Jesus said to them: Get connected!

**Our text for today is about connection.
 Who we're connecting to, who we're not connecting to...**

Look again at what Jesus says it is that connects us all.
 It's not our politics,
 and it's not our neighborhood,
 it's not our education, or achievements,
 it's not even our commitment to welcoming everyone
 who comes through these doors...

The primary connecting point, according to Jesus, is 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 to repentance."

In other words, what connects ALL of us is our need for God's grace.

Question: How many of you are sinners?
Every hand in the air...right, good.

What connects all of us is our need for God's grace, Christ's call to repent, to turn around, to head in a new direction.

I knew a church that did this.
Not just individuals, but as a congregation—they went in a new direction.

Do you recall, back in 2014, when the Ebola virus came to Dallas?

Thomas Eric Duncan, a Liberian man,
traveled from Liberia to Dallas to visit his fiancé,
a woman named Louise.

Louise had been living in the United States for some time.
She was a member of Wilshire Baptist Church, about a mile away
from the church that I was serving at that time.

Unbeknownst to Duncan, he had contracted Ebola before his trip,
and after he arrived in Dallas...he got sick,
he was hospitalized,
the diagnosis was made,
and tragically, he died.

But there was still the fear.
Had he unknowingly spread it?
What happens if Duncan's fiancé also contracted Ebola?
Could she have spread the disease as well?

International media descended on Wilshire Baptist Church.

As one member of their staff later wrote:

“The first Sunday morning of this crisis, we looked up into our church balcony and saw 15 TV news cameras lining the rail. In the vacuum of information available and in the midst of panic across Dallas, we had the opportunity to preach a message of faith over fear.”¹

And George Mason, the Senior Pastor at Wilshire, visited Duncan’s fiancé, Louise, and her family almost daily, in the midst of the Ebola fears. He always followed the advice and oversight of doctors. And miraculously, Louise and the members of her family had not contracted the disease.

Now I knew most of this story when I was living and working in Dallas. What I didn’t know until very recently was that that church—Wilshire Baptist, an exceptional congregation—had not always responded that way when it came to hospitality, welcome, and connection.

Back in the early 1980s, a couple and their two sons came to Wilshire. The mother and the sons were HIV+.

George Mason was not the Senior Pastor at that time...but he does recall the church’s response:

“...the church reached out superficially but refused to allow the older son to attend Sunday school with the other children.”

¹ [George Mason and Mark Wingfield: How to lead calmly in a global outbreak | Faith and Leadership](#)

“It was a painful moment,” Mason said, recalling that time in his church’s history almost 40 years ago—
 “...we didn’t get it right.”²

But flash forward four decades.
 I think one could say that this church...had repented.
 Gone in a NEW DIRECTION.

Of their response to Louise and her family, George Mason recalls,
 “The only criticisms we received came from outside the church”.

But the congregation was united in its response.
 It was determined to love Louise and her family.
 To stand by Louise and her family.
 To be...connected.

Because that’s what Christ was calling them to do.

All of which raises the question:
 What is Christ calling our church to do?

Who are we, at this time in our life together here at Westminster?
 And what connections is God asking us to make?

I was enormously relieved, as I trust all of you were, when news came out that the hostages at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas had escaped, physically unharmed, last weekend.

The episode hit home in a strange way for me.

² [As it embraced member in Dallas’ Ebola crisis, church found its own redemption \(dallasnews.com\)](http://dallasnews.com)

The rabbi, Charlie Cytron-Walker, grew up in my hometown of Lansing, Michigan. In fact, he graduated from the same high school that I did, but we did not know one another, as we were 5 years apart.

But what made the events feel a bit more personal was that his late father, Mark Walker, was the principal at my elementary school for a couple of years, when I was in maybe 3rd-4th grade, if memory serves.

His father was a wonderful and courageous person who died during my elementary school years at a far too early age of cancer. I have vivid memories of Principal Walker coming into our rooms, with a wig, without a wig, to talk with us about what was going on with him.

So it came as no surprise to me that Rabbi Cytron-Walker is also a wonderful and courageous person. That Rabbi Cytron-Walker let this stranger into the synagogue because he appeared to a person in need—he was extending hospitality—he had no idea about this stranger’s anti-Semitism, and his EVIL plans for the day.

Let me say very clearly that we, as Christians, have an obligation and responsibility not only to applaud Rabbi Cytron-Walker’s bravery, but to stand against such evil.

To name anti-Semitism and speak out against it whenever we see it.

To let our Jewish brothers and sisters know that we stand with them in the face of that kind of hate. And to work for a world in which such hate will not occur.

Like so many others, I stand in admiration of Rabbi Cytron-Walker’s leadership in a moment of crisis, and I stand in admiration of his initial instinct toward hospitality, welcoming the stranger before he ever knew what the man was up to...it was an instinct that, thank God,

did not end up costing Rabbi Cytron-Walker or any of the other members of the synagogue their lives.

I mention this not only because of the small but important impact that Mark Walker had on my life all those years ago.

I mention it because our connection to others in this world...will surprise us, and startle us. And it's central to who we are as God's Church.

- When I think about the months and years ahead at Westminster, I would love for us to become more connected with our Jewish and Muslim neighbors here in Greenville.
- And I would love for our church to establish relationships with our African-American brothers and sisters in Christ here in Greenville.

There have been, I understand, some of these intentional friendships and connections in Westminster's past. I would love for them to pick up again, and be in our church's future.

So...just to make sure you're still with me:
What do I think today's text is about? Connection.

How we can connect in faithful ways to one another within these walls, and how we can connect in faithful and perhaps new ways to our neighbors outside these walls?

As you consider the question, let me invite you to engage in a little exercise with me.

There's a famous painting by the 16th/17th century artist, Michelangelo Caravaggio, a painting that portrays the first part of our text for today.

The moment when Jesus calls Levi to be his disciple.
The painting is titled "The Calling of St. Matthew"...

Now tradition has it that perhaps Levi was Matthew's name before he became a disciple, and after he followed Jesus, he went by Matthew instead.

In Matthew's Gospel, he's named Matthew.
In Luke's Gospel, Luke calls him Levi.

Caravaggio's painting is imaginary, in that it plays with time.

The scene is not 1st century Galilee, when Jesus actually called Levi. No, in the painting, the scene is a dark room in Rome in the year 1600.

In the painting, two people have entered the room and are pointing to a table. There are five people seated around the table, there's money on the table, and one of the people at the table is pointing at himself, as he looks at the men who have entered the room—

and there's a look of astonishment on his face—
as if he's saying, "You want ME?"

But there's a bit of ambiguity in the painting.

It looks like the person at the table is pointing at himself...but there's another interpretation of it that says he's pointing at another person, a younger man with his head down, who doesn't even see the one who's doing the calling.

In which case, the exclamation is “You want HIM??!!”

Feel free to Google the painting after worship to make your own judgment call on this. Who exactly is being called in the painting?

And after you do that, I want you to place yourself in that room. And imagine that the one being called...is you.

In fact, you don't have to imagine it. It's true.

Whether you're a tax collector or a fisherman,
 a doctor or a lawyer or a stay-at-home parent,
 whether you have a PhD or no high school degree,
 whether you have 60 years of marriage or whether,
 in your past, you have two broken marriages—
 Jesus is not calling you because of your resume,
 your references, or your credentials.

He's calling you because he loves you, and he needs you.

“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 to repentance.”

How many of you are sinners?
 Show of hands...good.

That means you are called by Jesus,
 at this time and in this place,
 to turn around, to head a new direction,
 to go make NEW CONNECTIONS...

Amen.