

You're Cordially Invited

Mark 2: 13 - 17

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Standing on the dry baseball field, I can remember two of my 7th-grade classmates standing in front of the rest of us. As usual, the two classmates who were picked to be the team captains were the ones who were the most athletic the most popular, and to be honest, had the most ability to swoon all the girls in the school. And then there were the rest of us. The nerdy ones. The husky ones. The lanky ones. Together, all of us, found ourselves lined up like a row in front of the other two. In a way, we looked like a bunch of rejected superhero characters from a failed comic book.

While in the New Testament, Matthew the tax collector, most likely never played a game of baseball nor probably experienced those awkward middle school gym class days, I am sure he knew what it felt like not to 'get picked.'

The story about Jesus calling Matthew to follow him and Jesus eating with the sinners, starts in Mark 2 verse 13. It opens up with Jesus going out to be beside a lake. The lake he seems to be by is believed to be the Sea of Galilee. And it was at this point, a large crowd had begun to gather around him as Jesus began to teach them which is a strong theme in the gospel of Mark. And as Jesus was walking along, he saw a man named Levi who was a sitting in a toll collector booth.

Now while biblical historians have different theories if Levi, who eventually becomes Matthew, knew the other disciples before this story, we do know that he was a toll collector and that he was most likely collected tolls from those traveled on the road between Damascus to Caesarea through Capernaum. The tolls Levi (or Matthew) would have collected would have been for Herod. And it was a toll that many thought was unfair causing people to have anger towards all those who spent their career taking the money from the poor as they increased the riches of Herod.

But after Jesus had met Levi and called to follow him, Levi invited Jesus to his own home to dine not only with other tax collectors but all those who represented as being sinners and not just those who did dishonorable jobs. But all those considered unclean such as adultery, thieves, blasphemers, and murders. All these people, according to religious law and tradition of the time, were the lowest of the lowest.

But while Jesus was eating with these individuals, the Pharisees saw him and they began to question Jesus as to why he was eating with such people who were deemed as being the worst in their society.

"Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" they asked.

Upon hearing this question, Jesus responded by saying a proverb that has numerous parallels in Greek and Jewish literature: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Like a real doctor, Jesus concern and well being was more for those he considered in need of his guidance and his love. And it was a love he felt for them, the outcasted, the forgotten, that allowed Jesus to break every purity law or stereotype that may have put on them.

Over the years, there have been many different images that seek to portray Jesus. Some of these images having him with various color of eyes, hair, and skin. But if there is one image that all of us can see of Jesus beyond of what he may have looked like, it's the image we have of Jesus as being a revolutionary who not only challenged religious laws, traditions, and stereotypes of the first century.

Jesus was an image of someone who truly gave himself for all people, especially the ones who had been outcasted because of who they were, what they believed, or the things they did. It's this image of Jesus that we see painted in our gospels that show us not a Jesus of tradition and conformity, but an image of a Jesus who challenged others and challenges us to truly step beyond stereotypes and embrace others with love and acceptance.

But while we can read and see a Jesus who faced criticism for going against tradition and laws by healing the unclean, befriending the outcasts, the persecutors, even those who collected money for oppressive empires, we can also feel what it must have been like for those who felt neglected by society, outcasted by purity laws, and all those stereotyped, neglected, and forgotten. And that's because today, over 2,000 years later, we have felt that same neglect in our own lives that goes well beyond not getting an invitation to play baseball.

From the man who is neglected from getting a job because of his skin color. To the woman who is neglected from getting proper health care because she doesn't have the money. From the child who is neglected at school because he has trouble learning like others. To the grandmother, whose neglected by her family who doesn't associate with her anyone because of falling out in their relationship. From the man who lives on a street corner and is neglected by all those who pass by. To the couple madly in love who is neglected from their church because of their relationship is viewed as sinful. You see, the feelings of neglect, hurt, and being cast out is a feeling that still runs deep in the veins our society, even today. It's a type of neglect that has made people feel as if they are not welcome, they are not loved, they are not noticed, and their life does not matter. And while we find ourselves talking about the need to reach out to those who are different from us—the truth is, we often find ourselves being held back because we too are too caught up in fearing stereotypes and wondering, "what will people think of me if I associate with them?"

A few months ago, a documentary entitled "Bully" was released that featured a realistic view into the lives of children who face bullying every day in America. One of the children featured in this documentary is named Alex. As a seventh grader living in Sioux City, Iowa, Alex often found himself bullied because he didn't fit in with the rest of the children at his school. Throughout the movie which at times can be disturbing to watch, the director captures Alex being pushed, shoved, and choked. One scene, watchers of the movie can see Alex even stabbed by his peers during a bus ride to school.

But while all these scenes are disturbing to watch, what was most disturbing was the neglect he faced during his suffering. In one particular scene which has caused much outpour of emotion and conversation on radio and television talk shows, was when the assistant principal at Alex's school tells him the reason he is being bullied is because he is being an

instigator of his problems. And despite Alex's attempt to tell her what he is dealing with, she doesn't listen to him.

In an interview with CNN's Anderson Cooper about being bullied, Alex said, "It literally came up to that point, they bullied me so much I just didn't feel it anymore," Alex says. "You see me most of the time I'm just smiling... because I don't want to show them my true feelings."

While Alex found himself with being faced with bullying, what was worst for him was the feeling of neglect. Not just neglected by teachers and classmates, but neglect and feeling forgotten by others who he treated him as if he was invisible. It's this feeling that many, not just our children, feel from others in our world today. Feelings as if we aren't invited because we aren't smart enough, attractive enough, wealthy enough, power enough.

Even though I did consider myself a geek when I was younger, I also considered myself a fan of baseball. And one of my favorite baseball players growing up was Jackie Robinson. Robinson was always an inspiration of mine because not only did he break a race barrier to become the first African-American to play in Major League Baseball in 1947, but he also inspired not only many other African Americans, but anyone who has been cast out and neglected that they can overcome this feeling of being left behind.

Robinson recalled that during his first year playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers was one of the most difficult years of his life. While he had a lot of support, Robinson felt excluded by many and would often have to use separate locker rooms and stay at different hotels. But the biggest challenge for Robinson was when he came under much scrutiny and hostility whenever he would walk onto the field at Ebbets Stadium. Especially when he made an error during a game.

Once such error for Robinson came while playing one day in his home stadium of Ebbets Field in Brooklyn. The fans began to jeer him. He stood at second base, humiliated, while the crowd booed. Then, without saying a word, shortstop Pee Wee Reese went over and stood next to Jackie. He put his arm around him and faced the crowd. Suddenly the fans grew quiet. Robinson later said that that arm around his shoulder helped him feel as if he was part of his team, but it also saved his career.

Despite the hostility Robinson faced, despite the anger and isolation he must have felt by having to use separate locker rooms, being the target of booing, and hostility just because of the color of his skin, feeling that arm around him must have truly been a special moment for him. A moment that despite all the difficulties he had faced, it was at that moment he truly felt as if he was not alone and that he was part of something greater. That feeling must have been similar to Matthew when Jesus said, "Come, Follow Me."

For both of these individuals, it wasn't just a sign of compassion that was being shared by others, but it was an invitation they received. An invitation that says, I am right here with you. I am going to stand right beside you. And I accept you and going to always accept you for who you are.

You know, the realistic truth of our world and our society is this: our life and our world do still represent the sixth grade to us. Much like groups of different students divided by popularity rankings, our society is divided between those who are rich and those who are

poor, those who have power and those who are meek, those who have status and those who are unknown, those who sincere and those who seek to take advantage of them.

But while we find ourselves living in an unfair world during an unfair time, it's important to remember that when we find ourselves being reminded by our society, and even by ones we love that we aren't invited or accepted because of who we are, it's our God through Jesus Christ who unlike our society, not only accepts us for who we are, but loves us all unconditionally no matter what we do, what we believe, or where we have been. For it's our merciful God who not only puts an invitation on all our desks, but it's our God who has not forgotten, has not abandoned, and when we are going through the divisions and the heartaches, puts an arm on our shoulder and says, I am standing right here with you.

My friends, all of us are cordially invited to a table of unconditional love and everlasting grace. A table where no one is forgotten and no one is excluded. But we are also invited to send out the invitations. Invitations to others that despite what others may have told them about God's love, this table, is open to everyone. And one does not need to be crafty with glitter, glue, and crazy scissors to make invitations. One just simply needs to share love with others for this invitation to be given. Love shared through serving the homeless, love shared by standing up for others who are in need of a voice or love shared listening to a friend or co-worker in need. It's by doing those things that allow us to send the invitation of love and acceptance to others. In fact, all of you here at Lincoln Park Presbyterian are already sharing this love and passing that invitation to others by telling others they are opened and welcome to be part of this community. It's by doing these things you are telling others they are cordially invited.

All while we may find ourselves being distracted by messages that dissolve what it takes God to love it, just remember, it's our God through Jesus Christ who not only understands the neglect, the hurt, and the abandonment we all have felt in our lives. But it's our God, a God of unconditional love and mercy that reaches an arm out to us and says, "I don't care who you are, what you have done, what you believe because I accept you. I love you—and I am inviting you to come sit next to me at the greatest table for the greatest feast. I have invited you."

Bibliography

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