

Hospitality and Hostility
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
October 6, 2019-AM Service
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Matthew 10:1-8

I want to look at the list of disciples Jesus calls. Usually when preachers look at this list, we like to focus on how ordinary it is. We like to say, "Look at this un-impressive lineup! If God can use them, God can use anyone, including us!" That's an important message, but today I want you to look at another feature of this list. For most of the 12, Matthew simply lists their names and maybe the names of their family connections. But 3 of the 12 get more than that. Three of the disciples get a little extra description, and that extra description is important. One of the three is Judas, who's mentioned as a foreshadowing of Jesus' death. I'm not going to say anything more about him. The other 2 are the ones that interest me today.

The first one I want to talk about is Simon the Zealot. Why does Matthew take the time to tell us that Simon was a Zealot? What is a Zealot? Well, depending on your perspective, the Zealots were a terrorist group. There were several political factions in Israel in those days, and all the political differences between these factions revolved around how people felt about the Roman occupiers. Some Jews were tolerant of the occupiers. They did business with them and worked within the system. Others hated the Romans. Some of those resisted and others fought. The Zealots were the ones who fought.

The Zealots took their name from the story of Phineas, found in Numbers 25. Phineas caught a fellow Israelite named Zimri in a romantic embrace with a Midianite woman, which was against God's law. The passage says that when he caught them Phineas was so full of *zeal* for God's honor that he took a spear and killed them both with one blow. Inspired by Phineas' zeal for the purity of Israel, men and women who hated the Roman occupation called themselves Zealots.

The zealots didn't just approve of Phineas' zeal, they approved of his means. To them, anyone who compromised with the Romans was no better than Zimri and deserved to be shishkabobbed. The fiercest Zealots were the Sicarii. The Sicarii took the name from the Sicae, the long thin daggers that they hid under their robes. The Sicarii used to go through Jerusalem, they would find men who they thought were in league with the forces of Rome, and they would stab them with their daggers and then flee. The Jews who tolerated the Romans or did any kind of business with them were terrified of the Sicarii. *Those are Simon's people.* I'm not saying Simon was an assassin. I'm not saying he used to go around with a long knife concealed in his cloak. But He almost certainly approved of those who did.

So Simon the Zealot is one of the disciples who gets a little extra description. The other is Matthew. Matthew is identified as a tax collector. A tax collector. Where does that put him on the socio-political spectrum compared to Simon? It puts him WAY on the opposite extreme. Simon is a terrorist/freedom fighter. Matthew is a collaborator. Matthew is exactly the kind of person who would be a prime target for one of the Sicarii knives. The Zealots hated everyone who cozied up to the idol-worshipping Romans, but the tax-collectors were the worst. They didn't just collect taxes on behalf of the Romans, they added to the assessment so that they could line their own pockets. Tax workers are not well-liked in any culture, but when one of

your own countryman is squeezing you on behalf of an occupying force, the animosity is about as high as it can get. So, if the Zealots were on one end of the Jewish political spectrum, Matthew and his friends were way on the other end. And that begs the question: How did Matthew and Simon end up in the same small group? Do you think that was an accident? Do you think if someone had told Jesus about their wildly different politics, he would have gone in a different direction? "Jesus, you can't put them together, they'll kill each other!" I seriously doubt it. I think Jesus knew exactly how different these people were and I think He put them together on purpose. I think Matthew gives us the details about the terrorist and the tax collector to show us that Jesus brought them together on purpose. I think Jesus calls Matthew and Simon together to show us what He wants in His church. I think Jesus brings these two men together to show that he has come to destroy the power of sin and division.

We know a little about the powers of division, don't we? We live in a time of palpable social and political tension. We're not stabbing each other with daggers yet, but there is a steady escalation of things that people are willing to say and do to defeat their political opponents. When we watch the news or when we read about the fights, we don't just see the division, *we can feel it*. That's true isn't it. You can feel the intensity of the division. And you can feel it growing. Sometimes it feels overwhelming and hopeless. Is there any common ground here?

What I want us to see today is that when you feel the intensity of those divisions, you are feeling the power of sin. In the Bible, sin is more than individual acts of disobedience. Individual acts of disobedience are part of sin. When you do something against God's will, that's a sin. But if you just made an enormous spreadsheet listing every sin you ever committed, you wouldn't capture the fullness of sin in your life. Sin is more than a list of misdeeds; sin is a power that enslaves. That's how Paul talks about sin. In Romans 6:6 he says that sin can rule over people. In Romans 6:16, he says that sin can make people its slave. In Romans 3:9 he says that we were all under sin's power. In the same way, when God forgives our sins, he does more than go back through the list of our sins and say: "you're forgiven for that one and that one and that one," He sets us free from the power of sin. He wins a victory over the power of sin and death.

Sin's power is something you can feel. When you meet a person who has become utterly trapped in an addiction to porn or alcohol, you feel the power of sin. When you meet a soldier who is suffering from moral injury and soul injury because of what they've seen in combat, you feel the power of sin. When you turn on the TV and see the division in our society and you start shaking your head, you feel the power of sin.

Jesus came to destroy the power of sin. Jesus came to destroy the power that divides us. He makes that explicit in Ephesians 2:15-16: *"His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility."* He doesn't just forgive the individual sins of people who are divided, though he certainly does that. Jesus puts to death their hostility. Puts it to death! That's not accounting language, that's combat! He's not just paying for your individual sins; he's defeating sin's power. So of course Jesus calls the terrorist and the tax collector on purpose. He fully intends to destroy the dividing wall of hostility between them. He will do that, as Paul just said, by through his blood shed on the cross. Through his death and

resurrection, he will take all the long knives of hostility into himself and offer in return grace and new life.

Not so very long after they were called, Matthew and Simon find themselves sitting together around a table in an upper room. I imagine them sitting right beside each other. Jesus is there at the head of the table. He's just finished washing their feet. He gives them bread. "This is my body for you," he says. Matthew passes the bread to Simon. They both eat. Then Jesus holds up a cup of wine. "This is my blood," he says. "It's poured out for the forgiveness of sins." This time Simon passes the cup to Matthew. They both smile. There they are the terrorist and the tax collector. Brothers in Christ.

Do you think that means Matthew and Simon now agreed about everything? Do you think that means they had the same opinion about every social and political issue? I doubt it. I would guess their opinions have changed because of Jesus, but I'm sure they still have differences. Only now those differences are relativized by the larger, eternal unity they have in Christ.

The story of the terrorist and the tax collector reminds us that the church, founded by Jesus and nurtured at this table, is a different kind of community. In most communities we affiliate with, we look for places where we will feel comfortable and where people share our interests. And that's fine. We call those affinity groups, and there's nothing wrong with affinity groups. We have affinity groups right here at church. But the church as a whole is not an affinity group. When you belong to the church, you are moved by the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is breaking down the dividing walls. Come into this place and you should expect that God will push you toward people who look different, think different, who vote different, and who like different music. Expect that He will push you toward each other so that He can break down the dividing wall of hostility between you. Churches forget that sometimes. Sometimes we-and I definitely include myself here-we want our churches to be like another affinity group. Maximum comfort and minimum fuss. But when we remember, when we practice the kind of hospitality that engages our differences and attack those walls, our hospitality becomes more than a friendly welcome, it becomes a weapon that our Lord uses to beat down the powers of evil.

LaGrave is a church with differences. We're not very racially diverse, unfortunately, but we are politically and theologically diverse. God has called together a lot of Matthews and Simons together and put them in one place. Sometimes, when I'm thinking in human terms these differences scare me. I feel the differences like a power, and I think: "How can WE hold this thing together? How can I hold this thing together?" Those are faithless thoughts. But when I think of Matthew and Simon sitting beside each other at the Lord's Supper. And when I think of Jesus pouring out his blood on the cross and crying out "It is finished", I realize that the battle is already won, these differences will not finally divide us. We will be one. We are one.

It reminds me of something Linda Nagel used to say. Linda Nagel died this winter. As I met with the family for that funeral, they told me something that she used to say when dealing with difficult people. She would say, "You should be nice to that person. You might end up being bunk mates in heaven!" Now all sorts of questions arise in connection with this saying, not least of which is: "Bunkmates!? We get bunkbeds in heaven?! What happened to my mansion?!" Pushing those questions to one side, the central truth of Linda's saying is clear and indisputable: in Christ, the Lord is making us one. I don't know if any of us will actually be

bunkmates in heaven someday, but I do know that today we will all be tablemates. So come to the table with your brothers and sisters and taste God's hospitality, and taste the unity we have in Jesus Christ our Lord.

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