

Follow Me – A Call of Grace
Mark 2:13-17, Deut 10:6-9

Brothers and sisters, have you ever been selected or chosen for something? Maybe you put in a bid on a contract – and you were chosen to do the work. Maybe you put in an application for a scholarship – and you were selected to receive it. Or perhaps you applied for a Visa and you were selected and approved. Or maybe you auditioned for a role in a drama – and you were chosen for a part. Maybe you tried out for a spot on your school's varsity sports team, and you made the cut – you were chosen to play for the team.

The point is brothers and sisters, typically speaking when we experience being chosen – it is generally the result of our initiative and qualifications. We put in the bid, the application, sign up for an audition and try out for the teams. And if we are good enough – then we are selected, and we are chosen.

And typically speaking we don't usually appreciate being chosen for something that we didn't initiate, right? *"Hello!*

You've been chosen to participate in our survey," Or you get a notice in the mail... informing you that you've been selected for - Jury duty, or the TSA officer at airport security asks you to *"step over here please sir"* because... you've been selected for a random luggage check.

But however annoyed and inconvenienced it is to be selected for something that we didn't choose, it's a far worse experience when we are overlooked and not chosen isn't it. And I'm not necessarily talking about losing out on a contract bid, or not getting the scholarship we hoped for. It's more like the kind of situation we encountered as kids when we were picking teams at recess.

Do you remember that? You would gather on the baseball diamond, or the soccer field at recess and the selection process would begin. Pick-me! Pick-me! No, pick me!

And the first picks would always be the same kids too right, the ones who were good at whatever sport you were playing, then the mediocre kids got picked and finally it was down to

the kids that no one really wanted on their team but you had to include them anyways right...

Ok, we'll take Albert... fine, we'll take Agnes... oh man – there's no one left and we have last pick we're stuck with Leon, ok come on Leon just don't score on our goal like you did last time ok.

It was rough if you were the kid that got picked last, even worse if you were *always* picked last.

And it didn't necessarily get better as you got older, often it would get worse. Instead of being picked last you just get overlooked. Not chosen at all to be invited to hang out in high school or go to the parties at college – you were the social outcast, not cool, not worthy.

Now we all feel terrible about how this happens, especially as it pertains to kids, teens, young adults who are just a bit clumsy, goofy looking and socially awkward, mentally challenged, and have a hard time fitting in. Its kind of

heartbreaking to see it happen, its partly why we place a high value on inclusion, its not nice to be left out and we don't like to see people being left out...

Or do we... you see brothers and sister no one really feels badly if we're overlooking the narcissist, a scammer, a corrupt cop, the cheating husband, a prostitute, a child abuser, an ex-con with drug charges, or theft, or DUI... If these people are overlooked, if they are left out, if they are not chosen... we get it. We understand why.

These people have done things which implicate their decision-making ability, question their judgement, make them unreliable, untrustworthy, deceptive and even dangerous. Overlooking them and leaving them out and not choosing them for whatever - is probably a smart thing. If this girl shows up to babysit your kids, are you leaving them with her for the night?

The point is brothers and sisters, we can relate to the social ostracism, criticism and condemnation that's alluded to in our

scripture passage this morning that was directed at those who chose to become tax collectors.

We might know what it was like to be on the receiving end of it... We also know what its like to be on the giving end of it – and that there is justifiable reason for it as well.

You see, no upstanding, law-abiding good Jewish person felt the least bit sorry for any tax collector who didn't get invited to parties, who was overlooked for Passover dinners, who received dirty looks and insults as they went about their day.

The tax collectors were rightly condemned by the religious leaders for extorting and cheating their fellow Jews, charging interest, and being unfaithful Jews by working for foreign nations who oppressed Isreal. Their opportunistic love of money embodied the very essence of fraternization with other nations that had lead Isreal astray from God's law in the past. But, in this morning's scripture passage we see Jesus, walking beside the sea of Galilee again... followed by crowds of many eager people who have put forward the initiative to come out

and seek Jesus, to hear Him teach, to receive a healing or be delivered from an evil spirit... yet Jesus finds the one person who isn't seeking Him out, the one person whom the crowds despised, the one person who embodied the antithesis of the expected Messianic agenda... and He says to this one person "follow me!"

And Levi - the son of Alphaeus gets up, leaves his tax booth, and follows Jesus.

Now we often think that the calling of Levi the tax collector, the ensuing scandalous dinner party, and Jesus' rebuke that the sick are the ones who need a doctor... we often think this is the exemplification of inclusion, non-judgementalism, where Jesus repudiates overly zealous religious legalism and all its silly rules that categorized people who didn't follow those silly rules as "sinners" and thus exclude them.

Brothers and sisters, nothing could be farther from the truth here. Let me explain.

You see, Mark makes a specific point of identifying this tax-collector as Levi. To the point where it makes it confusing to figure out if this Levi the son of Alphaeus is the same follower mentioned elsewhere in the gospels as Matthew the tax collector, or if it is the other person in the gospels mentioned as James the son of Alphaeus.

It makes us questions if Levi and Matthew are the same person, or if Levi and James are the same person, using two names like Simon who was Peter, or Saul who was Paul. Or are there three different persons... and when Jesus was picking His discipleship team, Levi didn't get picked – but Matthew did...

There's no way to tell really, but that just emphasizes the point that Mark was very intentional about either; including the calling of a tax collector who didn't make the A-team later on, or using a legit but mostly unknown/unused alternate name for Matthew or James. And in both cases, you have to ask why?? Why do this?

Well brothers and sisters, what biblical, historical, covenantal significance does the name Levi have? You might remember that Levi was one of the sons of Jacob, and thus the father of one of the twelve tribes of Israel.

And Isreal's greatest liberator and leader, Moses, was born of the tribe of Levi. Moses' brother Aaron was chosen as the first High Priest when God made covenant with Isreal.

Aaron's descendants would always serve as priests before the Lord, and the entire tribe of Levi and their descendants were given the privilege of serving the Lord at the Tabernacle and then in the Temple in assisting the Priests – and we know them as the Levites. (Deut 10:8)

In fact, there is an entire book in the O.T. which is dedicated to all the rules and directions and ordinances that are involved in serving the Lord in worship and it is called... Leviticus.

So Levi is a name with massive historical, biblical and covenant significance...

And did you know that the Levites were the ones responsible for collecting the tithes and offerings that Israel owed to the Lord? (2 Chron 2:45, Neh 10:37) And they were entitled to a share of those tithes as their support while they served at the Tabernacle and Temple...

So, there is a great irony that Levi is sitting at a booth, collecting from his fellow Jews - not for the LORD's temple, but a foreign ruler... all while cheating and swindling his own people to increase his share.

Brothers and sisters, it doesn't really matter who Levi is specifically. Mark uses him as a symbol to identify those whom Yahweh had specifically called to lead Israel in worship and serve Him at the House of the Lord and indict them for breaking faith, neglecting their duty, and doing what came naturally to them – in the service of another King and for their own profit.

The Levites and the Priests were supposed to serve the people, mediate the presence of God to them, teach them,

correct them, help them offer sacrifices for their sin to be forgiven and pronounce them clean when they recovered from sickness, and restore them to community.

And these are all the kinds of things we see Jesus doing for the people after He called Peter, Andrew, James and John to be fishers of men. He teaches with authority, He has authority over evil spirits, He heals sickness, He even forgives sins! This is why crowds of people are seeking Him out and following Jesus, in contrast with Levi... sitting at the tax booth, collecting foreign taxes for selfish gain.

And so it becomes easier to see that when Jesus says to Levi, "follow me!" This isn't about establishing the principle of inclusion, it's about Jesus authority to forgive, restore and reinstate those who have broken faith, misused their call, neglected their duty – through following Him.

Additionally, by calling Levi to follow Him, Jesus formally assumes all the Levitical ministries and service of the worship of Yahweh into His ministry to fulfill them and to further them.

So Jesus calls Levi – follow me! Levi follows Jesus, and where does he end up? At the house of Jesus - in the house of the Lord. Which is where the Levites were supposed to serve.

Now, I know that the NIV translation of this passage we read this morning say it was Levi's house. But the original Greek is deliberately ambiguous about whose house it was.

Now if you see the main point of Jesus calling Levi as simply including the social outcast, and breaking down social barriers, you'll be inclined to say the house belonged to Levi because that fits into that assumption.

But if you understand the historical, biblical, and covenantal significance of using the name Levi, and Jesus' call as an act of forgiveness, restoration and reinstating, then it makes more sense that Levi ends up at Jesus' house because the Levites served at the House of the Lord.

So as the NASB translates it *"And it happened that he was reclining at the table in his house, and many tax collectors and*

sinner were dining with Jesus and his disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following him."

And while we know Jesus did not own a house, Mark is able to be deliberately ambiguous with the Greek grammar so as to present where Jesus was staying as "his house" in order to show that Levi was at the house of the Lord – where he belonged, restored.

And by hosting this dinner Jesus is exercising the Levitical role. Serving the people who have gathered as the dinner host, mediating God's presence to them, sharing intimate table fellowship with them - not through ritual washings, or animal sacrifices, but through His very person.

And this is why its important to know what's really going on here brothers and sisters, otherwise we'll end up like the Teachers of the Law who can only see that Jesus is contravening the Mosaic purity laws by eating with people who were ritually unclean and thus making himself and his disciples unclean by association. Why would Jesus do this?

Now we don't get stuck on the purity laws when we see Jesus eating with sinners, instead we get stuck trying to figure out how Jesus managed to pull off associating with sinners in this way without making it seem like He was endorsing their sins... because that's our modern Christian dilemma right? And there's really not a good answer for it.

But if this dinner party is Jesus facilitating the presence of God, in the house of the Lord, to God's people as a means of forgiveness, restoration and reinstatement through His very person, its much less confusing about what is going on here and far easier to understand how it is happening.

When Jesus replies to the Teachers of the Law that *"the sick need a doctor"* and *"He has come to call sinners"* it is an explanation that His very presence with these people is healing and forgiving them. There's nothing for us to get stuck on in that is there.

So, Jesus isn't trying to strike the right balance between associating without endorsing here – He is doing the work of

healing and forgiving and restoring as He brings people into His presence and has fellowship with them. Brothers and sisters the presence of Jesus is powerful!

Now the Teachers of the Law don't see it because they don't see who Jesus really is. Which is ironic... they should. But they are so focused on following the law as a means of merit, they miss who it points them too and who He is!

Now, Mark's gospel wants to help us avoid making that same mistake, but... if we are so focused on the principle of inclusion, we'll miss it as well. You see, the importance and significance in the Levi's call is not that Jesus broke with the restrictive social and religious conventions of his day and called a social outcast to include him...

It's that Jesus shows grace to those who have betrayed their calling, neglected their duty, and who serve themselves instead of others and... He brings them back into the presence of God, and that presence heals the sickness of their sin.

And so, brothers and sisters, Jesus' words to Levi also come to us this morning. Follow Me! We are also included, but not simply for the sake of inclusion. No – we too, like Levi, have an original call, a responsibility, a purpose given to us by God.

We human beings were made, created as male and female in the Image of God. Given dominion over the creation and tasked to rule it, fill it, develop it, and steward it as representatives of God, its creator – and to offer back to God all our work as worship.

But our first parents betrayed their calling, neglected their duty and disobeyed God – listening instead to the serpent, the devil, who deceived them into eating from the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, violating God's command and rebelling against Him.

And so today we find ourselves, doing what we were created to do, doing what comes naturally to us with the creation – filling it, ruling over it, developing it - but doing so under the reign and power of Sin, serving the devil, or serving ourselves.

So we neglect our duty to worship God, we selfishly keep all our time and resources for ourselves. We do not acknowledge or thank God for His creation, its beauty and bounty. We take all these good things and we turn them into god things.

We center our lives, our time, our energy on them, proclaiming – more so through actions than words – that this is where life comes from, this is what sustains us, this is what gives us meaning and purpose! This is what life is all about.

And we could spend the next hour reviewing all the consequences that have come into this world because of our sin – but we don't need to brothers and sisters, because we live it in our everyday lives... we see it in our moral choices, we feel it in our bodies, we experience it in our relationships and work, we see it on the news and social media. Lies, brokenness, oppression, sickness, disease, death and alienation from God.

We have betrayed our calling, rebelled against God, we serve ourselves. This is true of all of us brothers and sisters whether

we are an abuser, an ex-con, a scam artist, or... a polite, law abiding, nice, tolerant and inclusive, but godless Canadian.

But Jesus picks us, he chooses us, and he calls us – Follow Me!

Not to be inclusive with us... not because everyone has to be represented... but because we all bear the Image of God as human beings. It's because of who God created us to be, because of what God had planned for us. Jesus calls us in grace to offer forgiveness for our rebellion, restoration for our betrayal, reinstatement to once again serve God.

We don't deserve it; we're not chosen for our initiative or qualities or our future potential... it's all undeserved grace.

And it is the presence of Jesus among us that facilitates this and brings it about in us. The presence of Jesus is powerful!

So when Jesus words "Follow me" come to us as a church, the question is not "how do we manage to associate with non-Christians without endorsing un-Christian beliefs and sin?"

The question is are we passing along Jesus' call of grace – follow Me! With His presence and authority... Are we calling people back to their original purpose? To leave behind serving Sin, the Devil, or themselves... and be forgiven, restored and reinstated by following Jesus.

The question is not whether we are being "inclusive" enough so that the "right kinds" of "people and lifestyles" are represented in the church...

The question is whether we see the image of God in every single human being, regardless of how badly it may be defaced, how twisted it may be, or how self-centered it has become, and if we are offering Jesus' forgiveness, restoration and reinstatement to each person who bears that image.

And the question is not whether we are breaking down social barriers to include those who are socially outcast. The question is whether we are breaking down sin barriers, to facilitate sinners and the sick coming into Jesus' powerful forgiving and healing presence.

But probably the most important question for us this morning brothers and sisters is whether we see what Jesus is actually doing here... so that we follow Him.

Certainly, the teachers of the law didn't see it. But that didn't stop Jesus from being gracious in response to their neglect of their duty.

He offers them the same opportunity of forgiveness, restoration and reinstatement in His presence. He says "*I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*"

But there's the rub – if they can't see themselves as sinners, as failing in their duty and responsibility as teachers of the law, they can't receive His grace. They won't respond to His call of grace.

Do we see it? I pray the Holy Spirit will open our eyes so that we do. I pray that we will not see inclusivity, but that we will see Jesus, His authority and His powerful presence, and His grace.

Because brothers and sisters, Jesus comes to us this morning and calls us... Follow me.

And if we must speak of any type of inclusion in connection with this call, then let us honestly and truly include ourselves with the sinners and the outcasts who know where they stand and what they need.

Then we will eagerly follow Jesus, as Levi and his fellow tax collectors did, and receive the grace of His forgiveness, restoration and reinstatement through the power of His presence.

This is a call of Grace – Jesus says Follow Me! Amen.