

Pandemic Theology 2.0 – Gathering with Sinners

Matthew 9:9-13, Hosea 6:1-7

Brothers and sisters, I must admit that when we did our first sermon series on Pandemic Theology last summer - I did not expect to be doing a second series on it a year later. However - here we are, and in some aspects, things have become even more intense than they were last year – and the common experiences that we share in going through these circumstances are even more poignant now than before.

And that of course is the whole point of this series, to draw upon the common experiences that we have shared – and leverage the rational and emotional connections we have with them to help us relate to and better understand particular aspects of the Christian faith.

These experiences can become an analogy that provide a deeper appreciation of things that we may only have a surface understanding of, or be an example that helps a particular

teaching or doctrine that seems abstract or vague, really hit home and come alive for us.

And as the pandemic has dragged on, one of the experiences that we've had to contend with is the up and down, back and forth, rollercoaster ride of rising case numbers and resulting health restrictions and lockdowns.

When this all started... it was a new experience for us and as case numbers declined in the late spring and restrictions began to ease in June of 2020 there was hope that perhaps we had this under control and we were on our way back to... normal... or “a” normal.

But as the fall began, we saw case numbers start to rise again – especially after the Thanksgiving holiday and Halloween weekend, which indicated that people were disregarding the public health orders and holding indoor social gatherings for these celebrations.

And shortly after that – in mid November I think – the gov't responded by tightening up the health restrictions again, high-schools went back online, worship service capacity went from 30% to 15% - same for business, indoor dining in restaurants was closed – you all know what I'm talking about.

They even put out a special plea for people to put in the extra effort and not give into the temptation to disregard the ban on indoor social gatherings over the Christmas holidays, which was discouraging and frustrating because this appeared to be caused by careless people who felt they didn't need to comply with the rules.

So, Christmas came and went – rather unspectacularly – fortunately the case numbers started dropping afterwards, health restrictions were able to be relaxed once again and with the vaccine program starting to be rolled out – we were again feeling optimistic that we were getting things under control and hopefully on our way out of this mess...

Because everyone is feeling the strain of living under these restrictions, whether it means more cleaning and safety protocols that you have had to implement and observe in your business, or figuring out how to work from home instead of the office, or how switching back and forth between online and in person at school impacts the students – your kids, or just the isolation you feel from not being able to get out and socialize and have dinner and see a movie.

So – there was some anticipation and looking forward to being able to get out from underneath all that. But – as you know, things took a turn for the worse again and just as we were hoping to move into phase 3 of reopening here in AB, case numbers started to increase and we got sent back to phase 1.

And this latest set-back is not only frustrating and disappointing but it has turned into anger and resentment at those who would impose these restrictions – our gov't and public health officials, and at those who continue to refuse to comply and openly flaunt their disdain for these restrictions.

We've seen that anger expressed in our social media feeds, on the news reports, and within the ranks of the gov't itself, and it dividing us and polarizing us and turning us against each other. We are all so tired of living under this oppression and restriction and we just want to get out from underneath it all and get back to the way things were.

You all see it, you know what I'm talking about, and you are all experiencing it as well to some degree or another.

Now – all this anger, frustration and longing that we are feeling can help us relate to how the Jewish people and their religious leaders were felt during the New Testament times.

They had lost their political freedom - not just for a few weeks at a time over a year but for many many many years.

It started back in 740 B.C. as the Northern Kingdom of Israel was carried off into exile, and eventually in 587 B.C. the southern Kingdom of Judah went into exile as well. These

were the consequences for their continual covenant unfaithfulness with Yahweh.

And as you know, seventy years later, a remnant was allowed to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple and the city of Jerusalem under the protection of King Cyrus of the Persians, so there was some hope for the Jews that they were moving back towards a restoration of their country and freedom – we can relate a little bit...

But – world history moved on and Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire... and his heirs really did not like the Jews - and they persecuted them terribly. This is when the priestly family of the Maccabees rose up and defended the Jews, fought back against their oppressors, defeated them and regained their own political independence!

And this was seen as an indicator that God was blessing them again and hopefully they were on their way to full restoration

as the Covenant people of God with all the corresponding blessings.

Until... the Roman Empire showed up in 63 BC and conquered Jerusalem and occupied Judah and the Jews once again lost their political freedom. And any further attempts to rise up and overthrow the Romans like the Maccabees had been able to do with the Greeks, were unsuccessful and ended very badly for those involved.

So – by the time Jesus was born and entered into His public ministry, the Jews had concluded that God must be withholding their covenant blessings from them, and not allowing them to re-establish their political and religious independence as God’s chosen people because some of the Jews were continuing to be unfaithful to the Covenant Law.

Foreign occupation not only took away their political independence, it introduced all sorts of new ways to break God’s law - new gods, sexual practices, worshiping new gods through sexual practices, ignoring or only half-heartedly

observing the Law of Moses, or not observing it at all, and perhaps the worst offense of them all – working for the Roman Empire’s taxation system and getting rich off of extorting your fellow country-men. It was these offenses which were believed to be preventing the Jews from regaining their political independence as God’s covenant people.

So –all the anger and frustration we are feeling about our current situation and those who flaunt the public health measures and how the gov’t has to respond to that, helps us to relate to how the Jews of Jesus day were feeling about the Romans, tax collectors and those “sinners” who flaunted the Law of Moses. Are you getting the connection? Good.

Now why is this important? Well brothers and sisters, I’ve noticed something in how we tend to understand Jesus’ ministry in our day and age – especially when we read passages like the one we read this morning, where the Pharisees are upset that Jesus is associating with “*tax collectors and sinners...*” we often understand it in the following manner...

When Jesus' gives his response about desiring "*mercy, not sacrifice*" and not calling "*the righteous, but sinners*" we tend to hear that as Jesus "*throwing shade*" (as the kids would say these days) and scolding the Pharisees for being uptight, over-zealous, kill-joys who are making mountains out of mole-hills and over reacting about hanging to these so called "sinners."

Obviously that group of people aren't perfect - but who is??? Just because they aren't obeying a whole bunch of "ruley-rules" some of which the Pharisees had made up, doesn't mean they should be treated like they aren't as good as everyone else, and looked down upon, and... marginalized!!! Thank goodness at least Jesus gets it, and he will hang out with them and He isn't intimidated by the Pharisees disapproval of it.

Brothers and sisters, when Jesus' ministry is understood and described in this manner - it says far more about us... than it does about Jesus' ministry... and what it says about us isn't good.

It says that we are very casual with God's law, that we think it is not to be taken very seriously, that we can determine which part should be obeyed and which parts could be overlooked because we've kind of moved beyond those parts these days...

It says that what we actually think is offensive and wrong in this situation - is the imposition of rules on people, and the marginalizing of people who can't or won't follow those rules.

And it says that what we *really* think we need to be saved from is being saved from having to obey a whole bunch of unnecessary rules, and so what Jesus' salvation actually looks like to us, is a relaxing of the law, or doing away with the law. Isn't that why Jesus can hang out with the sinners and scold the Pharisees for being so legalistic??

Now I know someone will say – but isn't that what Jesus did with Old Testament Law – he got rid of it and it doesn't apply to us anymore, it's all about a relationship now and this is Jesus having a relationship with these sinners...

Brothers and sisters, how you view the Law is how you will view the rest scripture. If you think that only bits and pieces of the Mosaic Law were really important, and that the Pharisees were over-reacting when people didn't observe it - you'll carry that same attitude over to N.T. teachings.

And whatever bits and pieces of scripture give you the kind of relationship that you want to have with Jesus, those are the ones you will select and pay attention to, but you'll ignore the rest. Do you see the problem here? We're just reading our own modern woke beliefs into who Jesus is and what he does – and its actually incorrect.

However – in our pandemic circumstances we are provided with an experience that can help us truly understand how offensive these tax-collectors and sinners really were and why the Pharisees and the rest of the Jews were rightly upset with them.

In the same way that we are upset and angry with those who disregard public health orders because they contribute to

rising case numbers, and in the same way we might be angry at the gov't for keeping us under restrictions and lockdowns, the Jews of Jesus day were angry and upset with those who disregarded the Law of Moses and participated in their continued oppression by the Roman Empire and thus prevented Israel from being fully restored as God's covenant nation.

Our pandemic experience helps us understand that what the tax collectors and sinners were doing was genuinely sinful and offensive and the Pharisees questioning why Jesus would eat with such people was not being uptight or over-reacting about minor moral issues – these were genuine offenses that broke the Law of God, these were the kinds of things that had led to their exile to begin with.

It put the Jewish people in the same confused position that we would be in if we were to see Jesus attending an indoor social gathering right now. Or if Jesus were to go and choose an AHS Health Inspector to follow Him as his disciple. We would have questions... right??

As did the Pharisees... *“why does your teacher eat with those people who are contributing to our nation continuing to be locked down and preventing us from getting back to the way they used to be??”* We can relate.

So – how does Jesus answer them?

Well let’s read His answer again, and let me stress that the key to understanding what Jesus means comes from realizing there are three parts to it.

First Jesus states *“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.”* Then the second part *“But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”* And finally, the third part *“For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”*

So the first part of Jesus answer deals with the unspoken assumption and implied accusation in the Pharisee’s question, that by associating with these tax collectors and sinners Jesus somehow approves of the wrong which they are doing or is minimizing it or lowering the standards of God’s law.

In response Jesus states *“it is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick!”* Now, I suppose Jesus could have said *“listen, we need to love the sinner but not the sin”* and made the same point – but he didn’t, because I’m not sure it would have made the same point.

He said *“the healthy don’t need a doctor, the sick do!”* Which is actually much more explicitly relational, a doctor has to be around his patients, and at the same time it does not let anyone off the hook for their behavior or relax the law. In fact – if the doctor comes and hangs out with you, that’s not really a good sign is it.

So, the next time you’re considering using that phrase *“love the sinner but hate the sin”* maybe switch it out to what Jesus said - *“the healthy don’t need a doctor, but the sick do”* and see how it speaks to you and what you’re dealing with at that point.

Ok – so that’s the first part of Jesus’ answer. In the second part Jesus gives the Pharisees some bible homework to look

up and study. That's why He says *"but go and learn what this means"* and then He gives them a bible verse; Hosea 6:6 *"I desire mercy, not sacrifice."*

Maybe you caught that connection when we read that passage as well this morning.

Now let me say that it's Jesus' reference and connection to Hosea here which allows us to frame this whole episode against the background of the consequence for Israel's covenant unfaithfulness and God's promise to restore them, and their longing for that restoration as God's covenant people – that is what the book of Hosea is all about!

And if the Pharisees went and studied this passage in Hosea as they had been instructed, they would realize two things.

First, they would realize Jesus is indicting their leadership as Hosea had indicted the priests in his day. When Israel's temple worship and religious system served its God intended purpose; celebrating the mighty acts of God, reminding the

people of their covenant obligations and showing mercy – (hesed, a covenant faithfulness term) by calling them to faithful obedience and repentance from their sins through offering sacrifices – it was wonderful!

However, during Hosea's time this was not the case, the priests neglected their duty to teach the law and its demands for righteousness and justice, and they were as corrupt as the people they were supposed to be helping, all the while however – the Temple worship system was running full steam, sacrifices galore, religious festivals at the appointed time – but it was all an outward show. In the end the priests were chiefly responsible for bring down the covenant consequences of defeat and exile upon the nation of Israel.

Jesus is leveling that same charge against the Pharisees – its not just the sinners and tax collectors who are at fault.

But there is good news in this – and Jesus indicates that the Pharisees will find it if they take the indictment of Hosea

seriously and admit they have sinned in this way. And that is why Jesus says *“I have come to call... sinners”*

Now on the surface level – this means that Jesus will call someone like Matthew the tax collector to follow Him as His disciple – because Matthew needs it, and if the Pharisees will admit they need it as well – Jesus’ call to discipleship extends to them also.

And if the Pharisees remember the larger context of the verse that Jesus quoted from Hosea, they will know it is preceded by an expression of repentance that is brought about from experiencing God’s discipline – such as being politically oppressed and living under Roman occupation.

Hosea 6:1 says *“Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds.”*

Now I think John Calvin really explains this verse well, he says that *“God doesn’t punish His people to destroy them, on the*

contrary, whenever He is severe in punishing sin, it is to promote their salvation”

And then Calvin gives this insight about the process by which people turn back to God, he says *“We must remember that the beginning of repentance is a sense of God’s mercy, that is when men are persuaded that God is ready to give pardon, then they begin to gather the courage to repent... they can determine that they shall not return to Him in vain”*

Thus Jesus says to the Pharisees – I desire mercy... Thus Jesus eats, fellowships with the tax collectors and sinners who are rightly excluded and put out of fellowship for their covenant unfaithfulness – but... In Jesus presence God gives them a sense of His mercy so they might repent and be healed.

The Pharisees can experience this too – after all the verse says *“let us,”* This is a plural repentance where there is a concern that others return to God as well, its not just individual.

So, the Pharisees can recover the true purpose of their religious leadership; calling the people to repent - by showing

the God's mercy to them, as Jesus has demonstrated for them though eating with the tax collectors and sinners.

And then as it says in Hosea 6:2 the restoration will come
"After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence."

Now John Calvin believes that the original intent of this verse was to show that the binding up and healing God's people would experience in turning back to Him would take time. Israel didn't bring down the covenant consequences upon themselves overnight, and so their restoration would require some time as well - if only so that they would come to see that their political independence was not the fullest expression of that restoration – living in God's presence encompasses so much more than that, and requires a much deeper work.

And thus, this verse begins to foreshadows the means by which God will bring about the full restoration and forgiveness of His people in the death and resurrection of Jesus – which is

the reason why God can be merciful to sinners and invite them to repent.

So what do we take away from all of this? Well, our current experience of frustration and anger with people and policies that prevent us from getting back to our normal life can be used by God to give us a deeper understanding of how Jesus dealt with sinners. God works through ALL things...

And through that, I pray that the Holy Spirit would give us a deeper conviction of the seriousness of sin, how offensive it is to God when we break His law, and what we rightly deserve as a consequence for that.

But not so that we will despair – but so that we will see our need all the more clearly for how God deals with our sin.

I pray that we will know more clearly that God doesn't overlook it, He doesn't grade us on a curve, He doesn't accept our best intentions, and He certainly doesn't relax or change His law when it comes to our sin...

Instead, He draws close to us in Jesus Christ – He gives us an indication that He is showing us mercy and that we can repent and He will give us grace.

He will forgive our sin; He will give us Christ's covenant faithfulness instead – and restore us so that we can live before Him, in His presence – both now and in eternity.

I pray that this understanding will help you realize the significance of what God has done for you – and above all, that because you realize just how serious sin is – you will have a corresponding increase in gratitude for amazing God's grace is and saving faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ did not come to call the righteous – but to call sinners. Amen.