

“Just Jesus”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
June 8, 2008  
Scripture: Matthew 9:9-26

I was driving one day behind a car that had a bumper sticker. It simply said, “Just Jesus.” And then came the word religion in a circle with a line through it. Just Jesus – no Religion.

I knew right away what they were trying to communicate. For we have all observed the excesses of religion. The rank hypocrisy of televangelists who rake in money talking about family values and then are exposed for having sad affairs. The passing off of political ideology under the veneer of religious values and the calculated use of religion as a weapon. The holy wars waged around the world under the guise of protecting religious values. The people who are seen sitting upright in church on Sundays but who spend the rest of the week as though it did not matter. We have seen “religion.” And it is not always pretty.

Organized religion adds another level for disdain. It is usually said with a sneer, “organized religion.” Organized to try and control the mysteries of God and that stifles spirituality. Organized religion that controls enormous amounts of property and uses rules to keep leadership in firm hands. Organized religion. I know of one minister who did not enjoy church administration and tried to reframe her church’s disorganization as a strength by saying, “if you don’t like organized religion, try us!” But that does not do justice to the sentiments underlying the bumper sticker.

Jesus was often under attack from the “religious” folks of his time. They didn’t like the meals he ate and the wine he drank. And they didn’t like the company he kept.

In our passage from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus and the Pharisees enter a dispute. A dispute about the role of sinners in the life of the religious community. Should the church be a gathering of good people, or a collection of sinners in need of mercy?

It started this way. As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and Jesus said to him [simply] “follow me.” And Matthew got up and followed Jesus.

Now you need to understand a few things about tax collectors who lived in Jesus’ time and place. Now in our time and place, tax collectors may rarely be popular people. The threat of an audit scares just about everyone. Although this year, with the refunds or economic stimulus payments most of us recently received, we may have a new fondness for the Internal Revenue Service. As an aside, if you just don’t know what to do with your stimulus payment, I will be glad to suggest that you use this unexpected money to do something generous. For anyone who has always wanted to make a sizable donation, but never could afford it, this may be the time to do something unexpectedly good that will benefit more than just you.

That is our tax collecting system, though. Full of loopholes and odd deductions, to be sure. We can as citizens debate what are fair level of tax ought to be to support our government. But it is relatively fair – or at least transparent and responsive to democracy. Elections have consequences, and if you don't like tax levels, we can collectively make change. But that is not the tax collecting system of Jesus' time.

It was much more nefarious. Remember, Jesus lived in an occupied country. Most of the time it was a peaceful occupation, but if things got out of line, the violence was not subtle, and the Roman Empire always won. In this occupation, the Roman Empire created a new system of taxation. Local people were hired to collect from the people. And tax collectors were allowed to pocket whatever they could shake down above and beyond the quota set by the Empire. So tax collectors in Jesus' day were not at all popular. The Roman occupation forced people to take sides, and the tax collectors sided with the Romans against the Jews. They chose to collaborate. Strike one. The high taxes to the Empire forced people off their land. Strike two. And tax collectors were allowed and encouraged to collect more than was required. They were cheats. Strike three. Tax collectors were not good people. That is the context.<sup>1</sup> Got it?

Now listen again to how the story begins.

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and Jesus said to him “follow me.” And Matthew got up and followed Jesus.

In case you were hoping that Matthew was sitting at a tax booth being audited by some unjust tax collector, that is a non-starter. In Matthew 10:3, included in the list of disciples, is “Matthew the tax collector.” He's the tax collector all right. He's the bad guy – and yet Jesus sees him, calls out to him and Matthew gets up and follows him.

We should also pay attention to what is not said and what does not happen in the gospel. There is no great spiritual conversion story for Matthew the tax collector. There is no begging for forgiveness and then Jesus calls him. There are no conditions placed upon him. A tax collector!

And this bugged the religious people, the Pharisees. It brought out all their self-righteousness. Can you hear them?

“Why him, the tax collector?”

“Why not me?”

“I'm a good person.”

“I don't rip people off by collecting taxes for the empire and skimming a bit off the top.

In fact, I give alms to the poor. And here he is calling Matthew the tax collector and not me?!”

In fact, it is not just Matthew. As the story continues (v. 10) Jesus sat at dinner with “many tax collectors and [other] sinners.” And when the Pharisees saw this, they were mad.

The Pharisees are the most frequently mentioned religious group in the New Testament. References to them are mixed, but overall, they get a bad rap in the gospels. I think the Pharisees were genuinely good people. They tried to be good people at least. They placed a strong

emphasis on the observance of the religious laws of purity. The Pharisees didn't think that the priests were the only ones who should live observant lives – they treated all aspects of daily life as it were part of the temple only service. The historian Josephus described the Pharisees as a group who lived simply, avoided any pretense of luxury, were extremely influential among the townsfolk.<sup>2</sup>

They tried to put their faith into practice. These were no “Sunday-only Christians,” as the expression goes, or more accurately, the Pharisees were no Saturday-only Jews. The problem was, they thought that since they tried so hard to incorporate faith into daily life, that they deserved God's attention and special blessing. And if they, who tried so hard, deserved God's blessing, others, who were less careful, less faithful, less rigorous, less religious – well, they didn't deserve God's love and attention. “Membership,” as American Express says, “has its privileges.”

And so we have a dispute about the role of sinners in the life of the religious community. As it plays out in the Gospel, should the church be a gathering of good people or a collection of sinners in need of mercy?<sup>3</sup> “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners” (Matt 9:13).

And then, before the Pharisees have digested what he said, some disciples of John (the Baptist) – more religious folk – come to Jesus with their own complaint. Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?”

Fasting is a practice common to many religions. Refraining from eating. For Native Americans, Muslims, and Christians, fasting is one of several rituals that prepare individuals for interaction with transcendent divine power.<sup>4</sup> Native Americans fast. Muslims fast. Jesus fasted in the wilderness for forty days. And Christians of all stripes fast. And to the point of our story – the Pharisees fast. And the disciples of John the Baptist fast. “Why don't you fast, Jesus?” they asked. “Why aren't your followers religious?”

And Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Matt 9:15). If the point of fasting is to prepare for an interaction with transcendent powers, Jesus seems to be saying, it is too late to prepare to interact with me. I'm right here.

And then Jesus keeps going, talking about new wineskins.

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved” (Matt 9:16-17).

And then we get two stories of people coming up to Jesus begging for healing. And the juxtaposition of these two stories is remarkable. The arguments from the religious folks about religious practices set right next to people coming to Jesus to find help and healing and

wholeness. The woman who had been bleeding for twelve years and the leader of the synagogue whose daughter was resuscitated could have been the first to stick on the bumper sticker. Stop your religious arguing – Just Jesus.

Jesus' words about the new wineskins is an internal and constant challenge. Hearing them again leads to a renewal. Hearing them again is a revival of sorts that urge churches to throw away all the old wineskins. Toss off the remnants of old religious traditions and take up the new wineskins. And so there is a movement afoot in our culture to get rid of the old sanctuaries like this one built in a different era and a different time. And put up new "sanctuaries" if you can call them that across from malls with cupholders and bookstores. Take the cross off the wall, that might be a downer. And don't use the word Baptist or Presbyterian or any other denominational word in your church name. That can only serve to keep people away. Just Jesus – no religion.

I understand the feelings behind that bumper sticker. Believe me, I have my own frustrations with religion. Smothering the mystery of God with orthodox statements. I get frustrated with the slow movement of the church on issues of clear justice. "Like a mighty turtle moves the church," one friend says. We have seen the harm done by clergy scandals and the desire of the institutional church to cover them up. We have seen how religious boundaries serve to sever conversation between Lutherans and Presbyterians and United Methodists and Catholics, not to mention dialogue with our neighbors of other religious traditions. The word religion comes from the Latin word *ligare* – which means to bind together, connect – like ligaments in our bodies that connect bone to bone. Yet too often religion pulls people apart. I have my frustrations with the church! We need a renewal. We need to be open to the wildness of the Holy Spirit and the wideness of God's mercy. No more religion that fails to live up to Jesus' ideals. Just Jesus.

But Jesus does not appear in a vacuum. I don't think we truly encounter Jesus outside the company of others. "Wherever two or more are gathered" Jesus said, "I will be present." And as we are seeing, even "non-denominational" churches work together and serve as a category in the yellow pages. I'll be honest – I don't think sanctuaries like this are the old wineskins that need to be thrown away. I don't think that the stained glass windows are nothing more than a relic that belongs in a museum. I don't agree with removing the cross and yanking out the pews.

There are problems in our religion that need correcting. And we need to do away with any smugness or certainty that says we can go it alone. In the statement on the bottom of the bulletin cover from the Presbyterian Book of Order, we are reminded that all religions, including Christianity are human institutions.

The church in its mission encounters other religions and in that encounter becomes conscious of its own human character as a religion . . . The Christian religion, as distinct from God's self-revelation, has been shaped throughout its history by the cultural forms of its environment. Christians find parallels between other religions and their own and must approach all religions with openness and respect. Repeatedly God has used the insight of non-Christians to challenge the church to renewal. But the reconciling word of the gospel is God's judgment upon all forms of religion, including the Christian.<sup>5</sup>

When we are at our best, Presbyterians have had a deference to the past, but a critical awareness that the church is always in need of reform. When we are at our best, we do things in an organized manner – not to stifle the spirit, but to bring out our best. Jesus’ responses to the religious complaints in this passage serve as a constant critique for us – not of the Judaism of his day, but of the Christianity of our day.

For too often and too easily, we fall into some of those same complaints. We think that this is our church, and our building and forget that it is always God’s church. Too easily we think we know who “our kind of people are,” and look surprised when others come in to worship. Too often when new ideas emerge we think “we have never done it that way before.”

And so we come here, together, as a worshipping community in a particular religious tradition. We come here seeking Jesus. For healing, for hope, for inspiration. And together we can help that encounter with Jesus. For as a church, we can hold each other up in our prayers and hold each other accountable for our actions. For as a church we can drop the façade that everyone here is well and has no needs. As a church we must stop pretending that we have everything under control in our lives. As a church we can think about the new wineskins that are needed to do God’s work here and now. As a church we are old friends constantly surprised by newcomers.

As the stories today show, you don’t have to be a long-timer to receive the full mercy and attention of Jesus. You don’t have to be worthy of God’s love and grace – none of us are here because of our goodness, but because of God’s goodness.

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea. And it welcomes us and holds us, you and me. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> For a thorough description of the tax system see “Tithes and Taxes,” in E.P. Sanders’ Judaism: Practice & Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE (London: SCM Press, 1992) 146-169.

<sup>2</sup> Calvin J. Roetzel, The World That Shaped the New Testament (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985) 25-27.

<sup>3</sup> Assuming that the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees described in the Gospel of Matthew was meant to address and similar tensions in the early church.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, ed. “Fasting,” in The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) 357.

<sup>5</sup> The Confession of 1967, 9.41 and 9.42 from the inclusive language version available online, <http://www.creeds.net/reformed/confess67.pdf>.