

Loving Your Enemies III: Risking Association
Luke 5: 27 - 32
September 24, 2017
Todd Smith Lippert

This is the third week in a series on Jesus' teaching to Love our Enemies. In our first week, Abby talked about how we often repeat this teaching to love our enemies as a way to deny or avoid the real conflict in our midst, to try to just get along. She reminded us that Jesus wasn't an agree to disagree sort of person and invited us to go deeper, to see a life of love as a state of grace. Maybe that posture can be a starting point for us. Last week I preached through the story of a Centurion, an enemy who surprises with his humanity. Christian faith expects that we will be surprised by human beings, and I invited us to be a community that intentionally practices extending love to enemies. Loving our enemies won't happen naturally, but with practice, by staying centered in this tradition and teaching, our love will stretch towards strangers and enemies too.

This week, Jesus isn't just surprised by an enemy, he starts associating with enemies. I'm going to spend some time talking through this story and the stories immediately preceding it because they shed light on what Jesus is up to.

The story of the Call of Levi, the tax collector, really begins with the call of the first disciples which starts at the beginning of chapter 5. The crowds are pressing in on Jesus and he asks a fisherman for help, "go out a little way from shore." The fisherman, Simon Peter agrees, goes out a little way from shore. Jesus teaches for a while and when he finishes, says to Simon, "go to the deep water and let your nets down for a catch." Simon argues with Jesus, "we have fished all night long and caught nothing....but if you insist I'll cast my net." Simon casts the net and catches so many fish the net starts to break, and the boat starts to sink. Simon is afraid. Jesus says, "do not be afraid, for from now on you will be catching people." Simon, and James and John, who are hanging around this whole scene all leave everything and follow Jesus.

The next few stories answer the question, "what kind of people?" Who are the people who will make up this movement?

In the next story Jesus cleanses a leper. Jesus risks touching someone who was untouchable and heals him, and allows him to return to his normal life. In the next story, a paralyzed man is brought to Jesus and Jesus heals him and sends him walking. Jesus transforms this guy's life. But these two stories just seem to set up the main event, the call of Levi.

After healing the paralyzed man, Jesus sees a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax booth. Scholar Alan Culpepper says that there were two types of tax collectors in the Roman Empire, one kind was more corrupt than the other. The fact that Levi has a tax booth suggests that he is the more corrupt kind. Culpepper says that "Tolls, tariffs, and customs fees were collected at toll houses by tax collectors, and these tax collectors paid in advance for the right to collect tolls which made the system open to abuse and corruption. The profit I make as this kind of tax collector depends on the margin I can squeeze out of every transaction. It is like Levi is working on commission, the more taxes he collects, the more he makes. These tax collectors were often not natives to the area, they were wealthy because they were cheating people out of their money, and they were in collusion with Roman oppressors. There isn't much to like about tax collectors.

So what does Jesus do? He invites Levi, a despised, corrupt, rejected tax collector, into his inner circle. "Follow me," Jesus says to him. "Don't follow the way you have been going, follow me instead." Levi gets up, leaves everything, and follows Jesus.

The same verb is used for the paralyzed man as he gets up to walk and Levi as he gets up and starts to walk. The same kind of transformation and healing has happened in both lives. Levi leaves his former life behind. He repents, he turns from his ways. He leaves behind a life of cheating everyone around him for the sake of his own wealth and is now on a path of loving the neighbor.

The first thing Levi does is he throws a big banquet for Jesus at his house. Levi invites all of his tax collector friends. Jesus wants the disciples to catch people, so Levi says, "I know people!" But from the outside looking in, as people gather, Levi's house is a den of thieves, and Jesus is in the middle of them, eating and drinking. It's like Jesus has registered for a Payday

Lender's convention in Las Vegas, and someone has posted a photo of him going back to the buffet to load up his plate. It doesn't look good.

Scholars say that "In a Galilean village, a great banquet was a public affair. Even those who were not invited gathered around to watch the event." The small town I grew up in was kind of that way too. The Pharisees are there, of course, watching from a distance. They have good reasons to be upset. Jesus may well be eating with Gentiles, and that would be making him unclean. But he is also associating with people who are doing sinful things. We might want to tell Jesus what we tell our children, "when you surround yourself with good people, you will make better choices." As Peter James and John step away from the party to catch some fresh air, the Pharisees complain to the disciples, "hey why are you eating with tax collectors and sinners." I can imagine Simon Peter going to Jesus and saying, "hey the Pharisees are out there and they are complaining. This doesn't look very good. I don't think we want to be catching these people. So why don't we just stuff as much of this food in our pockets as we can and go."

Jesus says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have come not to call the righteous but the sinners to repentance."

In the same way that Jesus healed the lives of the leper and the paralyzed man, Jesus wants to heal the lives of the tax collectors. Jesus is interested in transformation of lives we give up on. This is the deep water where disciples are called to cast their nets.

Jesus risks association with the despised for the sake of transformed lives.

Once a month, I meet with a group of UCC clergy colleagues who serve in similar roles. I deeply admire all of these colleagues and learn from them every time we meet. One of these colleagues is the Rev. Kathy Nelson, Senior Minister at Peace UCC in Duluth, a church that is voting to become a Sanctuary church today, a church that will provide shelter to an undocumented immigrant facing an immediate threat of deportation. Our example has helped them along this path.

Kathy is an amazing minister and she leads a very vibrant church. One thing she does on a regular basis is she leads a Bible study with women who are incarcerated in Duluth. She goes to the prison and she has a conversation about love and grace and the ways this love of God can turn life around. She listens to stories of struggle, heartbreak, complication, and surprise. She listens long enough to be able to see the face of Christ in the human beings she is sitting with. Then what happens, because she has built a relationship with these women, when they are released, some of them come to church. Kathy welcomes them, and the church welcomes them. Some stay for a short while as they piece their lives back together. Some stay for a long time.

The church and Kathy are willing to associate with people who are often despised. The church proclaims good news of love and grace and the path of neighbor love it is on, and this is transforming. But there's no doubt that this association also transforms the church. This association has become deep water for them.

The risk of associating with people who are despised rather than staying separated from people who are despised does involve risk, and I can't say that I'm particularly good at this. But this story of Jesus eating with tax collectors stays in my mind when I'm ready to cast people aside, give up on my relationships with them, or when I tell myself that there is no point of being in relationship with a person *like that*. Jesus seems committed to staying in relationship with people, always open to being in relationship with people, while staying true to his values at the same time. Jesus doesn't go to the tax collector party saying, "you know, it's ok that you are cheating people, taking money from the poor so that they become even poorer." Rather Jesus is saying, "Why don't you try loving your neighbor, thinking about someone besides yourself. This will transform your life and the lives of those around you."

Taking the risk of associating with people who are despised doesn't mean we throw our values away. It does mean that we are open to being in relationship. It does mean that we are patient enough to try to stay in relationship. We may not be best friends in these types of relationships, we may not be able to stay in close relationships forever. But I wonder if it is through the simple acts of being open to relationship and staying in relationship that God starts pulling together the ingredients that can bring about real transformation in, not just someone

else's life, but in our life too. Maybe these relationships, these interactions, are the deep water for us as disciples.

May God continue to provide grace for the journey. Amen.