

SERMON TITLE: "The Gospel of Freedom: Freedom for Mercy"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 9:9-17
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 9, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

In July 1976, when our country was celebrating our bicentennial, my Libby Loggers high school marching band was chosen to represent the state of Montana in two of the nation's biggest parades. On July 3, we marched gloriously in New York City, and on July 4, we began to strut our stuff in Philadelphia—until a sudden torrential downpour devastated the parade and sent us all scrambling for the bus, with our band uniforms and musical instruments soaking wet. That was a bummer for everyone who had worked so hard to be there for the nation's 200th birthday party. But who can control the weather, right? We Americans might have been able to declare our independence from the British, but not from Mother Nature. The noise of the storm drowned out the sounds of patriotic music that day. In that city of Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell, we had to use our imaginations to hear freedom ring.

Fortunately, we have the freedom to use our imaginations and look on the bright side of any situation. So I want to tell you a joke. But I want to make sure you get the punch line. So, before I tell you the joke, I'm going to remind you of the Paul McCartney song that goes, "Someone's knocking at the door. Someone's ringing the bell." Now, with that image in mind, I'm going to ask you a question.

Why are there no "knock-knock" jokes about America?
Because freedom rings (. . . the doorbell. Get it?)

All through this month of July, I'm preaching a sermon series on "The Gospel of Freedom." We're working through Matthew chapter 9 and a little bit of chapter 10. Last Sunday, I preached to you about freedom from paralysis. But freedom isn't always liberation *from* what oppresses or binds us. Sometimes it's about freedom *for* something. So, today, as we continue our series on "The Gospel of Freedom," I invite you to look with me at Matthew 9:9-17. Let's see what it means to have freedom for mercy.

1—JESUS PRACTICED FREEDOM FOR MERCY WITH TAX COLLECTORS

In these verses of Matthew chapter 9, the story begins with Jesus practicing freedom for mercy with Matthew and his tax collector friends. As you know, tax collectors were people who were outside of Jewish favor because they were collecting money for the occupying Roman government. Even if the tax collectors themselves were Jewish, they were perceived as traitors to their kin. Tax collectors were considered dishonest, unclean, and unpatriotic. Because they worked for the enemy, they were the enemy. “Taxation without representation” doesn’t even come close to the irritation Jews would have felt toward those persons who profited from the oppression of their own people.

Despite all those harsh feelings, however, Jesus reached out to Matthew. Jesus went to him right where he worked at the tax collector’s booth. Jesus called Matthew to follow him. And because of Jesus’ merciful interest in him, Matthew got up from his tax booth and became a disciple of Jesus. Can you imagine if you were accustomed to your fellow Jews hating you, scorning you, calling you names, thinking all manner of evil about you, and shunning you as religiously unclean—and then along comes a Jewish rabbi who speaks kindly to you and even wants you to come and hang out with him? Can you imagine what it would be like to have a religious leader see the potential for good in you?

We might wonder if Jesus somehow knew that Matthew would respond positively. Did Jesus have x-ray vision into Matthew’s mind and heart? But the point of these verses isn’t to say that Jesus was divinely psychic. The point is that Matthew was able to respond positively because Jesus exercised freedom for mercy. Jesus’ freedom for mercy then led Matthew to host a dinner party, which, in turn, gave Jesus the freedom to share mercy with even more tax collectors.

When the Pharisees criticized Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus responded that it was the sick who needed a physician. And Jesus quoted a verse from the Prophet Hosea (6:6), indicating that God cares a lot more about mercy than sacrifice. Jesus and Hosea weren’t opposed to Jews offering sacrifices to God in the temple. That was a normal and expected part of their religion. But

the highest priority of Jewish faith wasn't meant to be religious purity and ritual. The top priorities of Jewish faith were always to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus expanded that even farther when he taught his disciples to love even their enemies and bless those who persecuted them. In Hebrew, "steadfast love" and "mercy" are synonymous. From Moses and the Exodus until Jesus and tax collectors, God's offer of freedom was always *for* mercy.

2—JESUS PRACTICED FREEDOM-FOR-MERCY CONTAGIOUS STRATEGY

Jesus wasn't a blind idealist. He didn't have his head in the clouds. He wasn't so heavenly minded that he was of no earthly good. No. Jesus was practical. He could clearly see how the Roman occupation and heavy taxation were oppressing his people. Jesus just didn't agree with some of his countrymen's responses. He didn't agree with the Pharisees that the Jews should try harder and harder to separate themselves from the Romans. And Jesus didn't agree with the zealots that hatred and violence were the answers. Jesus believed that the answer to the problem was to try to turn the other cheek, reach across barriers, build relationships of forgiveness, and heal human needs. If Jesus could persuade employees of the Roman government to meet him part way and even join him in his cause, then, wow! What an advance that would be!

Do you see how this worked? In a society wrought with conflict and division, Jesus offered merciful freedom so that others could and would gain the freedom to share mercy with others. It was a shame that Jesus had to defend that strategy. But apparently he did.

Jesus defended his freedom-for-mercy strategy against critics in the Pharisees and also among the disciples of John the Baptist. The Pharisees didn't like that Jesus was associating and eating with sinners, and John's followers didn't like that Jesus and his disciples were eating so much. John's disciples and the Pharisees often fasted, so they assumed that Jesus' disciples should have to go without eating too. This concern of John's disciples was phrased differently, but maybe the core issue was the same. When it was

tax collectors who were providing the meals, then eating too much was probably a greater offense than if Jesus had been associating only with Jews who were religiously pure.

The criticisms aimed at Jesus might have been rooted in jealousy. Jesus was an amazing person. Who wouldn't have wanted him on their own team? Who wouldn't have wanted him spending time with them? But then, off he'd go again, reaching out to those other people, exercising what Jesus considered his freedom for mercy.

It seems like the Pharisees and the disciples of John were thinking in terms of "us and them." They wanted Jesus to play on the "us" team, and not spend so much time with "them." But Jesus knew that perpetuating those "us and them" divisions wouldn't heal his nation. So he mixed things up by calling 12 disciples who came from different walks of life—fishermen, a tax collector, a zealot, and more. Maybe if that diverse dozen spent quality time together they would find ways for their larger society to get along.

What Jesus said in verses 16 and 17 about the inadvisability of sewing new patches on old cloaks and putting new wine in old wineskins might sound like an argument for keeping groups separated. It could be claimed that the tax collectors, on the one hand, and the Pharisees and disciples of John, on the other hand, would all be better served and preserved by keeping their distance. And maybe that's what Jesus meant. But I don't think so. I think what he meant to say is that we shouldn't force our traditions of religious rules on new people. When we are trying to reach out to new people and build positive relationships, we have to be more flexible. Thus, if Jesus and his disciples were going to connect with the tax collectors and sinners, they had to be willing and able to go with the flow to connect with them on their turf and in their ways. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. When in the home of Jewish tax collectors working for the Roman government, eat as the tax collectors eat.

I think Jesus would have made a good Girl Scout. Those of us who were Girl Scouts recall singing the little song that instructed us to "Make new friends, but keep the old./ One is silver, and the other

gold.” Jesus wasn’t trying to offend the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist by his disregard for their religious rules. He was just trying to expand God’s love and mercy so more people would experience the freedom to be merciful too.

Because we were setting up for the potluck picnic, we didn’t have adult Sunday School this morning. But the book we’ve been studying this summer has a chapter called “Jesus Is the Norm of the Bible.” That means, whenever there is any discrepancy or concern about what the Bible says, we should compare it to what Jesus taught. And what Jesus taught was that, whenever there is any discrepancy or concern about what God is asking us to do, the norm should always be to love one another with steadfast love and mercy.

In the Gospel of Luke, chapter 19, there’s the story of the tax collector Zacchaeus. Jesus told him to come down from the tree because Jesus wanted to go to his house for dinner. While Jesus was there, practicing freedom for mercy with him, Zacchaeus made the decision and promise to give half of his possessions to the poor, and, if he had defrauded anyone, he would pay them back four times as much. It was Jesus’ belief, strategy, and results that, when we practice freedom for mercy, it becomes contagious. Even tax collectors will find freedom for mercy.

CONCLUSION

Some of you have heard of the Catholic priest, professor, and author Henri Nouwen. On a website devoted to his writings, I found this little nugget of wisdom: “Judging others is a heavy burden . . . Once we let go of our need to judge others, we will experience an immense inner freedom. Once we are free from judging, we will also be free for mercy.”* Who among us wouldn’t like to lighten our personal load and improve our society all at the same time? Let’s follow Jesus’ example. Let’s practice freedom for mercy.

*<http://henrinouwen.org/meditation/freedom-judging-freedom-mercy/>