

SERMON TITLE: "Called to Follow Jesus"  
SERMON TEXT: Mark 2:13-22  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim Jame  
OCCASION: January 28, 2024, at First United Methodist Church

### **INTRODUCTION**

In my previous church in Pueblo, Colorado, there was a member named Bob. Bob had served in the army during the Korean War, and he told me about some of his experiences. As a soldier, Bob carried a New Testament in his chest pocket, and one time that New Testament absorbed a bullet and saved his life. Bob vividly remembered another time when he was nearly blown apart. His buddy next to him was killed, and Bob might have been too, if he hadn't miraculously felt some kind of force pushing him down into the foxhole. Throughout the war, Bob and his fellow soldiers served in many difficult spots. Bob told me that, if their commanding officer treated the men right, the troops would follow him almost anywhere.

Last Sunday, I started a series of sermons about our calling as Christians. Since we were recognizing our church leadership, we jumped right in with the call to use our spiritual gifts. Today, we're going to back up to what might seem like a more logical starting place. Using this text from Mark 2 and the calling of the disciple Levi, let's explore what it means to be called to follow Jesus.

### **1—RECEIVE HEALING**

Maybe the first point we see in this story is that when we're called to follow Jesus, we're called to receive healing. This healing could be from physical and mental infirmities, as Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law and many others in Mark, chapter one. Or, as Jesus implies here in Mark 2, that healing can also come from the forgiveness of our sin.

Mark tells us that, when Jesus called Levi and then went to Levi's house for dinner, there were many other tax collectors and so-called "sinners" there. Since we live in Ogden, Utah, where the IRS has major offices, let's be clear. This is not a biblical indictment against the collection of

reasonable taxes to run a decent and orderly government that cares appropriately for its citizens. The reason tax collectors were lumped in with “sinners” in Jesus’ day was because they were looked down upon for their cooperation with the Roman occupation. Their actions seemed traitorous, as they collected money from the Jews to support the oppressive Roman government and military. Also, Romans had different religious beliefs and customs. The Jewish scribes and Pharisees tried very hard to practice and teach Jewish purity and righteousness. So, they didn’t appreciate Jesus hanging out with people who didn’t share their vigilance about obeying the details of Jewish rituals and kosher dietary laws.

Jesus obviously had other interests. He didn’t focus so much on ritual purity as he did on developing relationships with people. Jesus perceived himself as a physician and healer, and the only way to fulfill his own calling was to connect with those who were sick and in need of his care. Consequently, Jesus didn’t need to hang out with people who were already well and had their life in order. Jesus the great physician wanted to find ways to interact with those who were hurting in their bodies and their souls.

So, this is the first aspect of our calling as followers of Jesus. We, like Levi and his friends, are called to follow Jesus into healing. Obviously, healing is a complex subject that raises many questions in our minds. But Jesus asserted, and so can we, that at least some measure of healing is always possible. As the gospel hymn proclaims, “There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole; there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.”

Or as another of our hymns prays,

Heal me, hands of Jesus, and search out all my pain;  
restore my hope, remove my fear, and bring me peace again.  
Cleanse me, blood of Jesus, take bitterness away;  
let me forgive as one forgiven and bring me peace today.  
Know me, mind of Jesus, and show me all my sin;  
dispel the memories of guilt and bring me peace within.<sup>1</sup>

Whether physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual, some kind of healing is always available. We who are called to follow Jesus are called to receive healing.

## **2—CELEBRATE GOD’S GRACE**

Our call to follow Jesus is also an opportunity to celebrate God’s grace. In Mark 2:18, we see that the disciples of John the Baptist joined the Pharisees in questioning the behavior of Jesus and his disciples. Their objection was not only why Jesus ate *with sinners*, but why Jesus and his disciples ate *at all*? If they were seriously religious, why weren’t they *fasting*?

Fasting was intended as a way of expressing sincere repentance and grief over sin. It was a way of focusing one’s attention on God’s will and praying in earnest. John’s disciples and the Pharisees weren’t wrong to employ that practice of faith. In just a few weeks, we will be in the season of Lent when Christians have traditionally fasted as a way to sharpen their spiritual sensibilities. There certainly can be a time and place for that type of devotion and sincerity.

But Jesus also wanted his followers to celebrate God’s grace, with enthusiasm equivalent to a wedding celebration. Our religion can’t be all sadness, guilt, and condemnation over our sins and the sins of others. Our Christian faith has to include a significant dose of joy in regard to the freely offered mercy of God. Jesus the healer would have joyfully agreed with the Mary Poppins’ song, that “A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.” And Jesus would have appreciated the final stanza of the previously quoted hymn:

Fill me, joy of Jesus; anxiety shall cease,  
and heaven’s serenity be mine, for Jesus brings me peace.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus knew there would be more than enough suffering later. Eventually, Jesus would be calling his disciples to follow him to the cross. But, for now, there was a time and place to let go of some worries and be nourished in God’s love. This was an occasion to set aside guilt and

judgment. This was an opportunity to rejoice in God's healing power. We who are called to follow Jesus are called to celebrate God's inclusive forgiveness and welcoming grace.

### **3—LEARN NEW THINGS**

When we're called to follow Jesus, however, we aren't just called to receive healing and celebrate grace. We're also called to learn new things. We see this in Mark 2:22, where Jesus compared his teaching to new wine that would ferment and expand. It wouldn't work to pour Jesus' new teachings into old, stiff wineskins. Such a combination would cause the old skins to burst, and the new wine to be lost. Jesus' new teachings required new formats and flexible structures. In other words, the disciples of Jesus couldn't rely on their former practices and knowledge. They had to be willing to learn new things.

Learning new things is one of the major requirements of following Jesus. The word "disciple" originally meant "student." Jesus' disciples were students, and he was their Rabbi, which is the Hebrew word for "teacher." So, when Jesus walked from the beach up to the tax collector's booth, Jesus was a teacher looking to recruit a new student. Jesus wanted to offer Levi an opportunity to learn something new.

The same goes for us today. If we're going to respond to the call to follow Jesus, then we must become students. And by "students," I don't mean the kind who talk all through class or who claim, "The dog ate my homework." I don't mean the kind of students who just fill a seat in order to meet the attendance requirements. I don't even mean the kind of students who go to school just because they enjoy the social life. And I especially don't mean those who participate in class just because it affirms what they already know. If we're going to be followers of Jesus, we must be willing to open up our minds to new ideas and possibilities.

So what new things did Jesus want his followers to learn? Well, we'd have to talk about the entirety of the gospels to express *all* that Jesus taught his followers. But even here in these verses

from Mark 2 we see that, from the beginning, Jesus' teaching included an expansive idea of God's salvation. God's healing and forgiveness weren't limited to just those who were already perfect in their knowledge and obedience to the Jewish law. God's joyous compassion, mercy, and care were available to all who were in need. Rather than put up barriers and restrictions, Jesus happily drew the circle wide to include women, children, the sick, the poor, and even those tax collectors and "sinners" who operated outside the Jewish tradition.

Jesus wasn't concerned that his students memorize a bunch of rules from the past. More than any laws or stories or parables, Jesus wanted his students to learn kindness and mercy to others. By observing how he interacted with people, Jesus wanted his followers to put new wine into new wineskins, so their spirits could stretch and grow. This is why he called Levi and us to become his disciples. We follow Jesus by learning new things.

### **CONCLUSION**

In *The Faith We Sing* hymnal, there's a song called "The Summons." It's about our call to follow Jesus. It's written like Jesus is speaking, and, in the first verse, Jesus asks us:

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?  
 Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?  
 Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known?  
 Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?<sup>2</sup>

I hope the answer for each of us is affirmative. By receiving our own healing, by celebrating God's grace, and by learning new things, each of us is called to follow Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup>Lyrics by Michael Perry, 1982, c. 1982 Hope Publ. Co.

<sup>2</sup>Lyrics by John Bell, c. 1987 WGRG The Iona Community, admin. by GIA Publ. Inc.