

June 11th, 2023

Matthew 9:9-26 “Eating With Sinners”

Good morning. I have no preacher secrets for you this week. I have no movie or cartoon recommendations. No stories about managing a church camp in Virginia or quirky Virginia church stories. No jokes or stories of lessons learned parenting three boys. What I do have to offer this week, though, is a Swahili proverb: “A bad thing advertises itself and does not sell, but a good thing sells itself even when it does not get advertised.” That’s one you have to think about for a second before it sinks in. Advertisement is a form of self-promotion, and I say this in a positive way. If you have a product or a service to offer, you’ve got to let people know that this product or service is available and accessible. That’s a basic principle for running a business. You need to advertise in order to succeed. From the consumer’s point of view, though, advertisements can seem intrusive. We get bombarded with advertisements day in and day out no matter what kind of media we consume. If you read a newspaper, you see advertisements among the stories. If you watch television, you have to endure advertisements. And is it my imagination, or does it seem like the volume of these ads is louder than the show you’re watching? Same goes for radio. You don’t have to consume conventional media to see advertisements though. When you’re driving down the road, you’ll see advertisements on signs and billboards on busses and bus stops. Around tax season, you’ll see folks dressed like Uncle Sam or the Statue of Liberty dancing on the sidewalk for a tax-preparation service. These forms of advertisement have been around as long as there has been a market economy. Some are clever like the ones you see during the Superbowl. In fact, some people will tune in to the game just to see the ads and movie trailers. Other ads are crude and corny like local used car dealers and furniture stores.

There are two forms of advertising that baffle me to no end. One is American pharmaceuticals. They claim to offer a miraculous treatment for whatever ails you, but they also include a list of potentially fatal side effects that makes you wonder if the treatment is worse than the ailment.

The other form of advertising is downright scary. It's the ads you see when you're browsing online. Tell me if I'm wrong, but for me I'll be thinking of something like ... I don't know ... the last time I went on a fishing trip or something like that. The next thing you know, I've got ads for fishing boats and fishing equipment showing up on my newsfeed. It's like someone or something out there knows what's on your mind before you even think about it. And what's funny is that you've got conspiracy theorists out there who carry wallets that block radio frequency identification technology because they're sure that big brother is tracking them to steal their identity. But then they'll turn around and fill out a personality survey on FaceBook to find out what kind of house plant best describes them. Answer these highly personal questions to find out whether you're an orchid or a cactus. "Golly, I wonder how 'they' keep getting all that information about me?" Anyway.

But again, advertising is necessary if you have something to offer to the world. We do it here at First Christian Church. We want to make it clear to the world about who we are and what we have to offer. So we have a weekly ad that runs in the *Enterprise Record*. We also post things on our website and social media and we make sure the rope lights in our cross and our chalice are always working so people can see us at night. There are quarterly journals out there dedicated to church advertising. Want to grow your church? Want to attract more people to your worship services? Here's how to promote yourself! Now, let's set this aside for a bit and take a look at our scripture this morning.

When you read it or hear it, this sounds like a random, unrelated string of events. Jesus calls a tax collector named Matthew to follow him. Then all of a sudden, Jesus is at someone's house sharing a meal with "many tax collectors and sinners." This prompted a group of Pharisees to approach his disciples and say, "What's up with your teacher? Why is he eating with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus must have heard them because he said, "Listen, those who are well don't need a physician. How about you go learn how God wants our mercy more than our

sacrifices? I didn't come here to call the righteous, I came for the sinners." That was quite a snarky thing for Jesus to say because as religious leaders, the Pharisees should've been familiar with this concept because that's basically the theme of most of the prophets in scripture -- "Quit trying to use ritual sacrifice to please God. God is more interested in you doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly." Okay, that should be enough for a sermon, right? Yeah, I could make that work, but Jesus isn't done yet because John's disciples start criticizing him too. I'm talking about disciples of Jesus' cousin John ... the guy who baptized Jesus and said, "He ought to be baptizing me, not the other way around!" They're asking Jesus why he and his disciples don't practice fasting like they do, or the Pharisees do. Jesus isn't quite as snarky with them as he is with the Pharisees, but he still comes up with a couple of illustrations where he basically says, "There's nothing wrong with fasting, but there's a time and place for it."

Then out of the blue, one of the local Synagogue's leaders brings his sick daughter to Jesus and asks him to heal her. Of course, Jesus says yes, but on his way over to this guy's house, a woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years found an odd yet creative way to be healed. She figured that Jesus, like any rabbi or teacher of the Law, wouldn't touch her because she was ritually impure, so she figured if she'd just touch his garment, she might draw some of that healing power from him. But Jesus turned, spoke to her, then healed her and said that it was her faith that made her well.

Finally, he arrives at the Synagogue Leader's house, and we've got to take a minute here to figure out what's going on because this sounds strange to our ears. Verse 23 and 24 says, "When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, 'Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.'" You might be thinking, "Why is a crowd gathering here and what do flute players have to do with anything?" Well, in those days, when someone died, professional mourners would come to mourn on behalf of the friends and family of the deceased. Mourning involved wailing and

crying and playing instruments. Yes, it sounds weird to us, but that was normal for that time and place in history. What you *didn't* want to do in a scenario like this is be disrespectful or make a scene. But here comes Jesus shooing people away and saying, “Get out of here. The girl’s not dead. She’s sleeping,” which, oddly enough causes people to laugh at him. Then Jesus takes the girl by the hand, which by the way is a big taboo because touching a dead person would render him ritually unclean, and the girl gets up.

All of this happens in just a short amount of time. If you read the chapter before this passage, Jesus was ruining a pig farmer’s day by casting a legion of demons into his herd causing them to jump off a cliff to drown in the lake. Before that, he was calming a storm on the same lake in a boat that was traveling from the place where he had just preached the Sermon on the Mount. This passage that Gary read is just *part* of a day in the life of Jesus. By the time we get here to chapter 9 Jesus was just trying to take a lunch break before the Pharisees and John’s disciples started harassing him. I could have preached five different sermons with the material we had in front of us today, but I want to focus on this last sentence in verse 26 – “And the report of this spread throughout that district.”

Now, let’s go back to that Swahili proverb – “A bad thing advertises itself and does *not* sell, but a *good* thing sells itself even when it does not get advertised.” Here’s an observation for you to consider. Not once in this passage or any other before it does it say that Jesus engaged in any kind of self-promotion or advertising. No billboards. No newspaper ads. No tv or radio spots. No social media posts. No people dressed in costumes dancing and spinning signs with “Jesus is the Messiah!” printed on them. How did he get so popular though? How does someone who does nothing to “advertise” get to the point where he can’t even sit down to eat lunch without an audience?

To answer this, let’s go back a few chapters to Matthew 4:23-25

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.”

How did Jesus build such a reputation as one who hangs out with tax collectors and sinners and calls them to be his disciples? How did he get the kind of reputation that would lead a woman who felt so unworthy and so unclean that she would sneak up on him and touch his garment in hopes that it would heal her? How did he get the kind of reputation that would cause a Synagogue leader to approach someone who had so many enemies among the religious elite to raise his daughter to life? He got this reputation by consistently doing what he was called to do. Not one miracle that Jesus performed during his earthly ministry was for the purpose of self-promotion. He never said, “Hey, y’all ... look at me, I’m the Messiah, and I’ll prove it by performing these miracles!” Yes, he made it clear what the purpose of his ministry was, but every miracle he did was to meet a very specific human need. Even when he calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee, he did it to calm the fear of his disciples.

Now, if I were to say, “Let’s get rid of our FaceBook page and our YouTube channel and shut down the website.” Or, “let’s pull our ad from the *Enterprise Record* and turn off the lights on our signs.” You’d say, “Wait! That’s not a very good idea!” And you’d be right to say that. We use those tools to help folks find us. But there’s truth in the second part of that Swahili proverb that aligns with what Jesus’ ministry was all about. “A good thing sells itself even when it does not get advertised.” Or as a saying in many recovery programs states – “Attraction rather than promotion.” The most effective thing that we can do to grow as a community of faith is simply *be* who we say we are. Who do we say we are? As a denomination we say that we are, “A movement for wholeness

in a fragmented world.” As a congregation we say that we are, “An inclusive, loving community of believers in Jesus Christ who strive to follow his teachings putting faith into action.” It doesn’t matter how fancy our website or Facebook page is, or how bright our lights shine, or the quality of production on our YouTube channel. The most important thing we or any other church can ask is, “Are we who we say we are and are we consistent in how we live it out?” Reflect on that this week and consider what you can do to make it so or to make it *more* so.