

## Week of March 14, 2021

### Matthew 9:1-17

<sup>1</sup> Boarding a boat, Jesus crossed to the other side of the lake and went to his own city. <sup>2</sup> People brought to him a man who was paralyzed, lying on a cot. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man who was paralyzed, “Be encouraged, my child, your sins are forgiven.” <sup>3</sup> Some legal experts said among themselves, “This man is insulting God.” <sup>4</sup> But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said, “Why do you fill your minds with evil things? <sup>5</sup> Which is easier—to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk?’ <sup>6</sup> But so you will know that the Human One has authority on the earth to forgive sins”—he said to the man who was paralyzed—“Get up, take your cot, and go home.” <sup>7</sup> The man got up and went home. <sup>8</sup> When the crowds saw what had happened, they were afraid and praised God, who had given such authority to human beings.

<sup>9</sup> As Jesus continued on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at a kiosk for collecting taxes. He said to him, “Follow me,” and he got up and followed him. <sup>10</sup> As Jesus sat down to eat in Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners joined Jesus and his disciples at the table. <sup>11</sup> But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” <sup>12</sup> When Jesus heard it, he said, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor, but sick people do. <sup>13</sup> Go and learn what this means: I want mercy and not sacrifice. I didn’t come to call righteous people, but sinners.”

<sup>14</sup> At that time John’s disciples came and asked Jesus, “Why do we and the Pharisees frequently fast, but your disciples never fast?” <sup>15</sup> Jesus responded, “The wedding guests can’t mourn while the groom is still with them, can they? But the days will come when the groom will be taken away from them, and then they’ll fast. <sup>16</sup> “No one sews a piece of new, unshrunk cloth on old clothes because the patch tears away the cloth and makes a worse tear. <sup>17</sup> No one pours new wine into old wineskins. If they did, the wineskins would burst, the wine would spill, and the wineskins would be ruined. Instead, people pour new wine into new wineskins so that both are kept safe.”

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### Hitting a Nerve

All of us push buttons in some way, shape, or form. It starts when we’re young as we learn boundaries. Liz and I are in the throes of this now as Walt continually tests every boundary he possibly can, from climbing the outside of the stairs and trying to stand on the dinner table, to biting and licking, he does it all. But there's a point when it changes from a necessary learning exercise to learn what is acceptable and what’s not, to a practice that serves either to annoy or to call out injustice. We might test the limits of someone’s patience if we don’t like them, and it only serves to make us feel better and make them angry. It’s like when we were kids, but old enough to know better, and on a long car ride we bothered a sibling and our mom or dad told us not to touch them anymore, so we hovered our hand millimeters from them so that we technically followed the rule, even though it was more annoying, to both our parents and sibling, than whatever we’d done previously. And that was the point - annoy while technically not doing anything wrong. We get a sick kind of pleasure from pushing buttons in that way, even as adults. There are also unjust rules we purposely test the limits of in order to call out the absurdity of them. I hear stories of people who get a new boss that implements new rules in an effort to “streamline” an aspect of their work, and the rules end up doing the exact opposite of their intended goal, so the employees follow the rules maliciously in order to prove a point. Yes the boss is annoyed, but they are also forced to see the error of their ways.

Jesus constantly pushed the buttons of the Pharisees and other religious leaders. Often it was done publicly, when he knew they’d be watching, as a way to purposefully engage them and question the rules he thought absurd. Sometimes it can feel like Jesus is purposefully annoying the religious leaders, but it always served a larger point. Matthew 9 gives us two examples of Jesus engaging in public activity that hit a nerve with religious leaders. In the first he had the audacity to forgive sins. We talk about Jesus forgiving our sins every single Sunday, so it’s normal

for us, but for them, they believed that God alone had that power, and they did not recognize Jesus as being divine. But the point wasn't whether or not Jesus is God, it's on who should be in the business of forgiveness in the first place. And on that, Jesus and the Pharisees were polar opposites. While the Pharisees said that forgiveness comes from God, end of story, Jesus held that because forgiveness comes from God, we all need to practice forgiveness in order to receive it, and he modeled that very behavior. When the Pharisees recoiled at Jesus' words of forgiveness, he showed them up big time. And it's this action that almost looks petty - he healed the man, who then stood up, grabbed his mat, and walked away. It was a mic drop moment, through which he put them in their place, but also showed who he really was - someone who did have the authority to forgive. The second occasion got not only the Pharisees riled up, but John the Baptist's disciples, too. Jesus and crew ate a meal with Matthew the Tax collector (who was Levi in Luke's gospel) and Matthew's tax collector friends. The Pharisees were angry at Jesus' presence with a group they found distasteful, while John's disciples were more upset that Jesus was eating and drinking so darn much while they spent all kinds of time fasting. Jesus' point to both was the same - what good are rules keeping us away from sinners or fasting in order to increase our faith, when the point of our faith is to reach people and change their hearts? It's a question we have to ask ourselves - what rules are keeping us from living our faith? What societal norms do we need to test the limits of to follow where Christ led? In a way, we're all like toddlers, testing boundaries to find the appropriate limits. But our guide can't be culture, it has to be Christ.

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*Abundant God - as your son pushed the boundaries of the Pharisees, questioning their rules and creating a new path forward, we ask that we may be similarly pushed. May your gospel make us uncomfortable. Help us begin to look at the world differently, not as something that shapes us, but as something we shape. Give us the courage to be good citizens of the kingdom by instituting practices that reflect your values rather than the world's. May Christ hit a nerve in us, that we may change. Amen.*