

“Going Boldly Where No One Has Gone Before”

Pastor Mary Robinson-Mohr

Genesis 12:1-9; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

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A number of years ago, the film “Fiddler on the Roof” swept through theaters throughout the US. Maybe you have seen it. Peter Ustinov is the main character, Teviyeh, who is a Jewish peasant living in Russia around 1900. He is one of the poorest people living in his little village, and he and his wife Golda have three daughters, all approaching marriageable age. Teviyeh sings about tradition in the opening of the movie, and it is clear that tradition is the glue that holds life together.

But then tradition finds many, many challenges throughout the rest of the movie. The village matchmaker comes to Teviyeh to arrange a marriage for his oldest daughter. Teviyeh agrees to the proposed marriage, and a deal is struck. But when the daughter is told about it, she bursts into tears. She is not thrilled and excited about her agreed upon marriage. She wants to marry a young man that she loves, one that has been her friend throughout childhood, and not the elderly, plump butcher that is to be her match.

Teviyeh and Golda do not understand, because this thing called “love” had nothing to do with their own arranged marriage. Their daughter’s friend is an awkward young man who is going to be a tailor, and probably one who will be a poor and struggling tailor throughout his life. The elderly butcher, on the other hand, is one of the wealthiest citizens of the village, with a fine and well-appointed house. Teviyeh and Golda think this is a wonderful match, and their daughter will never have to struggle through life as they have had to do. The daughter’s heart is broken nonetheless, and she cannot stop crying. She is inconsolable.

It is a strange new world that dawns upon Teviyeh and Golda, this business of going against tradition and arranged marriage to follow the love of one’s heart. Finally, Teviyeh relents to his daughter’s broken heart. He wants her to be happy, and if that takes bending the traditional way of doing things, he will do it. He breaks the arranged agreement for marriage, and gives permission to his daughter and her own chosen to marry. It is a bit of a shock to the village that he bucks tradition, and Teviyeh is criticized by several for his avant garde approach. If you have seen the movie, you know that tradition is challenged over and over again, and Teviyeh continually struggles with how much change is good, and how much tradition needs to stay to hold together the work of life.

Jesus challenges all kinds of assumptions and taboos and traditions in the Gospel lesson today. He disrupts the known and accepted order repeatedly, and this is not without condemnation by those who very much need the known and accepted order. Do you remember the opening of Star Trek and Star Trek the Next Generation? The Starship Enterprise is commissioned “To go where no one has gone before!” Jesus does

that repeatedly. Jesus ventures into areas where there are people that have been called forbidden and bad for everybody else, and he does it boldly and openly.

Jesus sees Matthew, a tax collector, doing his tax collecting thing. Now it is hard for tax collectors in any age to be popular, but those who collected taxes for the Romans in ancient Palestine were seen to be traitors to their own people. Additionally, they were often thugs with no discernable moral compass who would shake down the people above and beyond the required taxes to line their own pockets. They could do this with the sanction of Rome, and the aid of Roman soldiers, if needed.

So when Jesus approaches one of these tax collectors, and says, "I want you to be one of my disciples," it's a bit like someone today going to a drug lord or a loan shark and saying, "You would be a great candidate for ministry! Would you be a pastor in one of our churches?" It would cause some jaws to drop!

But all the gospels are abundantly clear that this calling of Matthew is not just some anomaly. It is not an isolated incident. Jesus freely socializes with such persons. And this isn't just socializing at a distance, such as waving or smiling as he walks by. That's certainly a beginning, but then Jesus goes where no one in his time has gone before. He bucks the traditional ways of doing things. He sits down in a home and shares a meal with these sinners and outcasts. He takes them seriously. He speaks with them. He listens to them. He hears their heartache and their life stories...and no doubt he challenges their behavior, but in a manner that says he has concern for them.

Now this puts cracks in the foundation of righteousness of his day. The Pharisees are troubled, because sinners and outcasts are to be shunned and avoided. Any one who is righteous should know this. So the Pharisees come to the disciples and question them about the choices and behavior of Jesus. Now, right away this triangulating pattern of conversation should be a sign that the Pharisees are up to no good. You know, you've seen this pattern in extended families and various organizations. Don't go to the boss, just mutter about the boss behind the scenes, and so forth. The Pharisees don't ask their question directly to Jesus. Why, they might get an answer that helps them understand things more, or they might give feedback to Jesus that is helpful to his methods. They might end up wanting to join ranks with Jesus even! In other words, they might actually solve a problem, and fixing a problem is not what they want. They get far more pleasure out of being disruptive. Their subliminal purpose is to create doubt among the disciples about the integrity of Jesus, to raise questions about just how "good" he really is. They will undermine this person who disturbs their traditions and their known patterns by causing his disciples to lose faith in him. Isn't it great that, when Jesus does get wind of this, he goes directly to them, and quotes the prophet Hosea? They can't exactly undermine their own Scriptures, can they?

Beyond that, the question posed by the Pharisees is inevitably one for those whose religious world is neatly organized into tidy categories of the religious people and the

sinful people. They need to separate the good people from the bad people, the clean from the unclean. The boundary lines are distinct. There are traditions that make them clear. There is a certain comfort in knowing who the insiders are and who the outsiders are, especially if you can frame such things around yourself so that you get to be an insider.

Then along comes Jesus, and he disturbs and threatens such a world. He hangs out with sinners, and the lines are blurred. Jesus goes where others fear to go, and Jesus challenges the traditions of who is in and who is out. Religious people, otherwise snug in the security of their religious identities, are left very unsettled.

Jesus doesn't break down these religiously imposed barriers only with a certain segment of people, however. There is a desperate father who has a dying child, a girl-child, specifically. Children were of little value or standing at that time, and female children especially were undervalued. They had very little status in the eyes of Pharisaical hierarchies. They had a long way to go to prove their righteousness. Nevertheless, this little girl – and her frantic father - matter to Jesus.

On the way to her bedside, there is a distraction. Yet another person that would be shunned by the Pharisees, a woman with a gross and disgusting chronic illness, one who is perpetually among the ritually unclean, touches the hem of Jesus' clothes. He stops. He is amazed at the faith of this social and religious outcast, and she is healed. She is restored to the community and to a normal life.

But this little distraction may have been costly. The little girl who is so ill has died by the time Jesus arrives at her home with her father. The mourners have already arrived, and they have begun the funeral rituals. Even so, Jesus enters the home, and touches the unclean dead body of the girl. No righteous Pharisee would touch any dead body, since this would spread the ritual uncleanness according to Pharisaical law and practice. Yet again, Jesus is not bound by the traditions and boundaries when there is a human being in need. Jesus touches the dead girl's hand, and she comes back to life, restored to her family.

Tax collectors and other thugs, so easy to write off, become disciples seeking God. A woman rendered useless and unclean to those around her is restored and healed. A dead daughter is given new life, and her family has their future hope restored. Do you see what is happening here? All of the people that are to be shunned so that others can see themselves as righteous and chosen are sought out by Jesus. People matter to Jesus, no matter who or what they are! Jesus boldly goes where others fear to go. Jesus throws aside the conventions that others hide behind. Jesus brings healing and renewal to those who are otherwise discarded by the good folk.

And Jesus does not leave anyone the same. Matthew is credited with writing a gospel so that we might know the Good News that reordered his own life. People who

were seen as lost causes because of illness or gender or other condition became “daughters” of God, children of the Most High.

You are here today because you wish to follow Jesus. Take heed from his example today. Let the love of God be the foundation of all of your rules, and may you and those around you be blessed by the changes this love will bring. Amen.