

“A Community of Acceptance”
a message by Dr. Bruce Havens
BASED ON THE THEME, “GO! COMMUNITY”
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.
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Matthew 9:9-12 [NRSV]

⁹As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. ¹⁰And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples.

¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

¹²But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

When I was a kid, we called our “community” a neighborhood. I had a group of neighborhood kids I played with. We played cowboys and Indians, we played with Matchbox cars, and stuff like that. They were my community. Nothing was worse than when we had a fight and I had no one to “hang” with until we got over the fight. Of course, in those days that usually took about an hour.

In high school there were “communities” of band geeks, stoners, rednecks, jocks, cheerleaders [who I think were really just a female version of the jocks], and the losers who just didn’t have any group to belong to. As a bona fide band geek I felt sorry for those losers who couldn’t fit in anywhere else. I had friends in most of the other groups but my basic identity was band geek.

In college there were communities called “fraternities” and “sororities.”

There were still jocks and cheerleaders, and even male cheerleaders which I thought was kind of weird at first. There were still band geeks and I was still one of them. There were still losers and stoners and such – there weren’t too many real rednecks that I remember at a place like Furman. There were the various religious groups on campus, I remember the Campus Crusade people – even the Baptists thought they were a little scary!

Once I became an adult I looked around and there were still groups, or “communities”, for people to belong to: political parties, sports teams, Rotary Clubs and Optimist Clubs, and of course there were churches, denominations and things like that. I think the reality is we are all still like kids wanting to belong to some kind of group as a way to be part of something bigger and better and more important than we are on our own. There isn’t anything wrong with being

part of a group – it is just that most groups can't provide what we are really longing for and sometimes groups get really way off track. Groups of soccer fans riot sometimes. Political parties lose energy and vision and can't get anyone elected. Even churches fail at being what they are supposed to be.

One of my favorite stories is of a church somewhere near Atlanta, Georgia that used to have great fried chicken dinners. They were so good that people would come to church just to stay for the fried chicken dinners after worship. Pretty soon the people got so busy making good fried chicken that they stopped bothering with worship and just turned the church into a fried chicken restaurant. There are a lot of churches that have closed because they lost sight of the kind of group they were supposed to be. The religious group called the "Shakers" basically disappeared because they didn't have enough children to sustain their faith community and they didn't welcome outsiders in. That's a recipe for vanishing. Even a lot of churches that haven't closed seem to have lost their purpose as a group.

I think one the most powerful reasons churches close, churches lose their purpose is because they become too exclusive. Now, some churches seem to thrive on a type of exclusivity and so do some groups. Augusta National Golf Club is a very exclusive group. Don't apply if you are a woman, or at least that used to be the case, don't know if it still is. Used to be don't apply if you are black or Jewish either. I know that they have at least a couple of black members

now. I remember when the Rotary Club I was part of in Suffolk, Virginia finally voted to admit women. I was so proud of them! It was a major step for a bunch of "good-ole-boy" southern gentlemen like that crowd.

Some churches believe very strongly in being an exclusive community. They believe this is what God wants. They make no bones about it. You can't be this or you can't be that and be in their group. You have to believe this way or you have to believe that way or you can't be in. You better carry the right Bible, speak in tongues, or commit some other proof that you are chosen of the Lord and acceptable or you can't be in the group. Of course, you won't be in heaven with them either. I am not sure I want to be in their heaven with them, but that is probably God's joke on me. But people flock to their doors. They are convinced that being a member means they belong – to God, to Jesus, to heaven and all others don't belong.

In the face of this I read this passage and I wonder. Was Jesus trying to create a community of exclusion or a community of acceptance? Was the church intended to be a place where we celebrate how we are better than others or a place where we know we are just as desperate for a Savior as anyone else? The reality is that most of us long to be part of an authentic community of acceptance. We will choose to be part of something even if it is wrong if we feel accepted, and the reason many people choose not to be part of a church is

because they feel they will not be accepted.

In the passage we read this morning, the Pharisees are complaining because Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners. Brian McClaren writes that the Pharisees were sure that if they could just convert all the sinners to be like them then God would send a Messiah to throw the Romans out. They considered themselves to be the group to be in if you wanted to be close to God, and they excluded those who were not good enough for God: women, sinners, lepers, non-believers, of course and anyone who was Gentile, who wasn't of their race couldn't be one of them.

Ironically the Messiah did come along – he didn't wait for everyone to stop sinning - and invited one of these tax collectors – Matthew by name, someone who stole money from his own people to give to the hated government, to follow him. He not only accepts him into his inner circle he eats with this turn-coat and with other sinners. What's more he justifies it and even says, these are God's people. He tells the Pharisees he came for them because they know they need my company. The subtext here is that God loves these sinners and tax collectors in spite of their sins and he loves those Pharisees, in spite of their exclusive ways. His actions and words angered and puzzled those who considered themselves insiders with God.

The conclusion we have to reach is that the outrageous good news of Jesus Christ is that God is more interested in creating a community of acceptance than

a community of exclusion. God knows that we need to be part of a community because that is the way God designed us. God designed us to be in relationship. "It is not good for man to be alone," God said when God created a helpmate for Adam. God has always wanted us to be in relationship with Him and with others. I think part of our theology that conceives of God as a trinity helps us recognize that God is in essence a kind of holy community and that is why God calls us into community to experience the essence of God through that community. The church is called to be the earthly embodiment of that holy community.

Now we could get into all the ways the church fails to be that holy community. And I would be the first to admit that the church has failed. Between crusades against Muslims, pogroms against Jews, forcing Western cultural assumption and practices on Pacific Islanders and Native Americans in the name of converting them are all good arguments against the church. All of these have been attempts to "purify" those who didn't qualify for God's love because they weren't acceptable in some way: theologically, racially, culturally or some other category we make up to exclude people. In the final run it seems to me as I read the Gospels Jesus was far more concerned with creating a community of acceptance than he was in creating a community of exclusivity.

What does that mean for us today as we try to be his church? It means we need to understand that people want to be part of a community of acceptance as

much as God wants the church to be a community of acceptance, of welcome or authentic inclusion. In today's world we proclaim our individual rights and individualism, yet we long for community. Community has so failed us in so many ways we now try to do it electronically or I guess I should say digitally. I have commented before on this, but isn't it a sign of how much we long for community, yet how difficult it is to find it when four people in the same house are all on Facebook and they are talking to each other that way? We long for authentic community.

In addition we feel so isolated and the problems of our world are so big we feel powerless to make a difference by ourselves. And ultimately, whether we believe in God or not we all long to have some sense of connecting with eternity, of our lives having some meaning beyond "eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die."

In the face of that we are launching our Community Building project, and our answer to the loneliness, the longing for community, the longing to make a difference in a world of big problems and of connecting with something transcendent is: "GO! Community." If you are alone "GO! Community is an exhortation to get into a community. Clearly we believe that a community driven by the Holy Spirit in the way of Jesus Christ is the best of all communities. It is also a description of what the church is supposed to be. We are to be a "GO! Community." We are to go out into the world and make a difference rather than give in to the

despair that we can't make a difference – a community can make a difference. And it is a statement of invitation and acceptance. So we are a community of acceptance called to go in service to the world in the name of Jesus Christ, the Messiah who invites all to come into his community and experience his welcome and his acceptance. Our hope is that you will take part in this event and that you will invite someone to come and be part of it as your guest. We hope you will help us show others that this is a community of acceptance unlike any elsewhere.

Jesus showed that a community of acceptance is at the heart of his movement when he ate and drank with sinners. He gave us a reminder of this in the sacrament we are about to take part in. Rather than it being a table of exclusion it is a table for sinners, tax collectors, Pharisees, Christians, cheerleaders, rednecks, band geeks and even losers with no community, and you and me. Instead of it being exclusively for those who have the right understanding, the right theology, the right attitude it is most especially a sign that this Messiah, this Savior came to show God's acceptance and love at his table for all and that he provides the food and drink for those who gather at it. Let us take part in it with thankful hearts that we are accepted at God's table in the community of acceptance. AMEN.