



Finish this sentence – *we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are...created equal.*

And so go the immortal words of the *Declaration of Independence*. The idea of equality is part of our DNA as Americans. We love the idea of equality. We teach the idea of equality. We cherish the idea of equality. We believe in the idea of equality. But we don't always practice it very well, as evidenced by the act that the grand statement in the *Declaration* did not, at the time, extend to all people.

Last week I began a new series of messages titled *What Is It About Jesus?* In this series we are examining the qualities that made, and continue to make, Jesus such a tremendously compelling figure. Last week we talked about the quality of love, and how the love of Jesus was demonstrated through his practice of mercy, grace, and forgiveness. This week we are looking at the way Jesus treated everyone with equality, and how that equality was manifested in three ways – equal standing before God, equal need before God, and an equal decision before God.

Our Scripture text for today is the calling of Matthew as related in Mark's gospel.

Mark 2:13-17 –

13 Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them.

14 As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

15 While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.

16 When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

17 On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

The struggle for equality is the story not only of our nation, but all nations across the span of history. Thomas Jefferson was exactly right when he said that we *are created equal*, but after our creation that equality often, unfortunately, comes to a screeching halt.

What Jesus offered is –

Equal Standing Before God.

Matthew would certainly have been a surprise pick of Jesus (although it would be easy to argue that all of the disciples would have been surprise choices). Matthew was a surprise choice because in calling him, Jesus seemed to go out of his way to pick someone who would be offensive to just about everyone. As a tax collector, Matthew would have been universally despised. No one enjoys paying taxes, as much as we understand that they fund important services. Tanya and I had a tax business at one time, and I don't recall anyone ever saying *I am so happy about paying my taxes!* It was certainly true in the time of Jesus that people did not like paying taxes. In fact, people greatly resented paying taxes and they greatly resented the people, like Matthew, who collected those taxes. Matthew, as a tax collector for the Romans, was no doubt very much despised by the Jewish people because he worked for their Roman oppressors. He would have been considered a traitor to his people. To keep his Roman employers satisfied, Matthew was required to exact a high level of taxes from the people, and then he added on an extra charge in order to pay himself. Tax collectors were notorious for overcharging people by large amounts in order to provide themselves with a very comfortable living. Besides being an unpopular figure among the general public, Matthew was probably unpopular among the other disciples as well, as it was likely he was their tax collector. Peter, James, and John, as fishermen, may very well have been required to pay their taxes to Matthew, and if so, I would imagine they were none too pleased to have him join their ranks as a follower of Jesus. Perhaps one of them pulled Jesus aside and cautioned him against such a pick, saying *Jesus, did you have this guy properly vetted? What are you thinking, calling a tax collector? How is this guy going to help our cause? You know, don't you, how unpopular he is. Isn't there someone else you could pick?* But Jesus did not choose someone different; he chose Matthew. Whatever protestations might have been offered by the other disciples, Jesus extended his call to Matthew and, in doing so, demonstrated an important lesson about his inclusion and his view of equality.

The words of our *Declaration* notwithstanding, equal creation does not mean equal station, equal treatment, or equal opportunities in life. Humanity loves to make distinctions between people, often doing so in order to exert one group's supposed superiority over other groups. There has always been a group, or groups, whom society designates as less than others and as less than equal. It is an inequality based on color, which contributed to a social acceptance of slavery and still plagues us in the presence of racism. It is an inequality that is also expressed through differences in social class, language, beliefs, religion, sexual orientation, politics, finances; the list can go on and on. The church, seeking to live the example of Jesus, brought a sense of equality to the Roman world that was not known at that time. In fact, that equality was a primary reason why the Christian faith spread very rapidly through the Roman Empire. Equality was not a cherished ideal in the Roman Empire, but it certainly was within the Christian faith. As Richard Rohr writes – *it was a time when perhaps four out of five people were slaves, women were considered the property of men, prostitution was a form of temple worship, and oppression and injustice toward the poor and the outsider were the norm. Against all of this, Paul proclaims... "all of you, are sons and daughters of God, now clothed in Christ, where there is no distinction between male or female, Greek or Jew, slave or free, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26-28)... This was surely threatening to those with various forms of power (whose feeling of importance lies in being "higher" than others). Yet this Gospel was utterly attractive and hopeful to the 95% who were "lower" in status. It assured universal and equal dignity... in the early church where all were equals. Sociologists think this was why Christianity spread so quickly.* (From an email about *Universal Dignity*. Monday, April 9, 2018)

The welcoming nature of Jesus was somewhat of a two-edged sword, however. His openness and welcome made Jesus a beloved figure to the people who were classified as "sinners." To the religious leaders, however, Jesus was seen in a very negative manner, and for the very same reason, because he welcomed the "sinners." Treating people equally made Jesus a hero to some, and a villain to others.

Because Jesus saw every person was indeed created equal and because he made himself at home with saint and sinner alike, Jesus upset the social and religious conventions of the day.

Despite the progress our society has made in terms of treating people equally, we continue to have a long way to go. It is my hope and prayer that, as followers of Jesus, we will be on the leading edge of the change that ushers in the equality that God desires for his children. We must not become like the religious leaders in the time of Jesus, who saw it as a religious virtue to avoid association with some people. Faith should never be used as a tool that separates people; it should bring us closer together!

Equal Need Before God.

It was early in the ministry of Jesus that a wide gulf began to grow between him and the religious leaders, causing him to be increasingly unwelcome in the synagogues (as an example, read Luke 4:14-30 and Luke 13:10-17). How ironic it is that Jesus, God himself in human flesh, would find himself unwelcome in the house of God! Jesus became somewhat of an outcast at the synagogues and at the Temple, and it was primarily because of his inclusion of all people and his love for all people. There was a gulf that grew between Jesus and the synagogue, a split between the people and institutional religion, which is not unlike today. There are people today who feel separated from institutional expressions of faith because they have been made to feel, perhaps, that they are neither welcome nor worthy of entrance. How sad that is.

It was a distorted interpretation of faith that caused the religious leaders to shun the “sinners.” They were what we now call “self-righteous.” To be self-righteous is generally seen as someone who is pompous and arrogant, but the definition of self-righteous is, as Luke explains in 18:9, is a person *confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else*. To be self-righteous means, essentially, a person who believes they can earn their own salvation through a superior sense of righteousness which, in turn, makes them better than everyone else. While such people love to differentiate between their own superior righteousness and that of others, and to find ways to show to themselves why they are better than others, the reality is that all people stand in equal need before God. Paul writes in Romans 3:10 that *There is no one righteous, not even one*. That is a very plain-spoken declaration of the fact that we all stand in equal need before God. Whatever our successes in life, whatever our financial or educational accomplishments, whatever our social standing, we have the same spiritual need as anyone else. We stand in equal need of God’s grace, God’s forgiveness, and God’s salvation. As the old saying goes, *the ground at the foot of the cross is level*.

When Jesus spoke about the sick and the well, that *it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick*, he wasn’t categorizing people into two different groups. He was, actually, saying what all people in that time would have understood, and that is that all people need a doctor at some point because everyone gets sick. No one is immune from illness; it is a universal condition among humanity. In the same way, everyone has spiritual illnesses that need attention. The self-righteous could not admit to or recognize their need, tragically.

An Equal Decision Before God.

Luke says that, in response to the call of Jesus to *follow me*, Matthew *got up and followed him* (verse 14). I assume Matthew did not spend much time thinking about the call of Jesus. He was probably, by this time, familiar with Jesus, as the fame of Jesus was already widespread, but there is no reason to think that Matthew would have had a personal encounter with Jesus before this point, certainly not anything that would make him think that Jesus would call him as one of his closets followers. This makes it all the more remarkable, then, that Matthew simply stood up, walked away from his tax office, and followed Jesus. Doing so was no small matter for Matthew, because in leaving his tax office he was burning his bridges with the Romans. The other disciples – such as Peter, James, and John, who were fishermen – could have returned to their vocations to earn a living if they chose, but not Matthew. Once

Matthew walked out on the Romans they would be finished with him and would have replaced him. In walking away, Matthew was leaving behind his livelihood, but might have still had financial obligations to the Romans, which was no small matter.

Why would Matthew take such a chance? Why would he walk away from his vocation, placing himself at risk financially and at risk with his Roman overlords? I believe it was because of the compelling nature of Jesus and the compelling decision Jesus placed before him. Matthew was invited to be part of something that mattered so much – the kingdom of God. I believe we all want to be part of something that matters, and in the invitation to be part of the kingdom of God we are offered that opportunity. It is not necessary to be a minister or a part of what we call “full-time” Christian vocations in order to work for the kingdom of God. God is looking for people of all walks of life to be part of his kingdom work, and there are many great opportunities in other vocations. I think, for instance, of the work of teaching and its opportunities to shape and mold young lives. What an opportunity teaching is! And having mentioned teaching, allow me to add this note – being a native of West Virginia I am well aware that my home state is often at or near the bottom of most lists. We are at or near the bottom in terms of economy, health, and many other areas. I am very proud, however, to say that West Virginia recently topped a very important list, and that is in leading the wave of teacher response to the draconian financial measures levied against them and schools by a number of states. I am grateful to God for the teachers who served as not only educators, but also role models, for me. I remember them, these many years later, with gratitude and fondness.

Because of such role models, I have always wanted to be part of something that matters and something that makes a difference. I believe the Kingdom of God is that something that makes a difference, and I think the church, as sometimes stumbling as it is and sometimes short of the mark that has been set for it, is an important part of bringing the Kingdom to others. I believe that God has called me to the same decision placed before Matthew, and that is the decision posed by the statement of Jesus to *follow me* (verse 14). It is a decision to which I responded at church camp, back in the summer of 1975, after my high school graduation. I had for some time felt the stirring of God’s call in me and on that Friday night at church camp, long ago, I stepped forward to respond to that call. That was the decision placed before me, and it was one that I sought to fulfill even before going into ministry. I have not always been a minister, and in whatever vocational capacity I have served I understood that the call of God was still upon me to work for his kingdom. That is a call that is placed before you as well, whatever your vocation.

The call of Jesus is, I believe, tremendously compelling. It is compelling because we are extended the promise that we are equal parts of God’s kingdom and equal in our service to him. We are people who stand before him in equal need and people who are extended an equal decision to follow him. May we follow then, as did Matthew and as the countless others have across the ages.