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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Luke 5:27-39

27 February 2022

Called and Chosen

Opening Greeting & Prayer:

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. Good morning also to all of you who are joining us online. Welcome to each and every one of our guests. We are glad to have you hear with us.

Let us pray: Great creator, you came to us as a person, a rabbi from the tiny, rural village of Nazareth in the province of Galilee. You have revealed who you are most clearly in Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ. When we question your call on our lives or your call on the lives of those around us, please remind us of how you called those first disciples in gracious and generous love. Like those disciples, give us the strength and vitality to follow closely in your way. Amen.

Message:

Called and chosen, the same title that I used two weeks ago for the story of Jesus, the fishermen, and the great catch of fish, a story that we have all heard at one time or another. Our text this morning is just a few verses later in Luke 5. After Jesus leaves the shore of the Sea of Galilee, we follow him with his new disciples Peter, James, and John as he heals two people, one from a skin disease and another from debilitating paralysis. Remember that Jesus is in the early days of his ministry. Unlike his contemporaries, the scribes and Pharisees of Galilee and the religious leaders in Jerusalem, Jesus brings his message and healing on his own authority, not the authority of the temple or the high priest. We remember from his baptism with John at the Jordan

River that they both no longer see the center of God's redemptive presence in Jerusalem. Instead, the presence and power of God are centered in Jesus. When Jesus touches the unclean person with a skin disease, he is not made unclean; the person is made clean and sent to the priest to be affirmed as such. In the healing of the person plagued by paralysis, Jesus expands the restoration of God's people to include healing of social and spiritual brokenness. God is here, the long-promised Messiah has come to fully restore body, soul, mind, spirit, community, and world. As we had heard in that first sermon in Nazareth, Jesus has come to bring liberation from all of the effects of sin and brokenness.

In verse 27 then, Jesus is leaving the city, in which these healings have happened; he comes upon Levi's tax booth. The Roman empire used local people to collect their taxes. Tax collectors were among the most hated of the community because they not only were cooperating with the empire but doing so at the expense of their friends and neighbors. They would often collect more than what was owed them so that they could build their wealth. When Jesus calls on Levi to follow him, I wonder if the other disciples begin to grumble, wondering how Jesus could include such a person in his followers. To their amazement, Levi responds, leaves his tax collecting behind, and joins the others in step with Jesus. Levi even offers his home for the evening meal, and Jesus agrees.

Word spreads quickly to many in the area that Jesus is eating with the wrong people, and even more come to join the meal at Levi's house, more of the wrong people that is, while the right people watch from the outside. Note this interesting image from the story: the wrong people are close to Jesus, eating and drinking with him, while the right people are outside the house, grumbling about it. I'm wondering in this moment how the disciples are feeling, no doubt fully aware that who they are sitting with are the very same people who have taken money from their

families and local businesses. What does it mean that all of them are now sitting at the same table together? As word gets out, the meal turns into a party for tax collectors and sinners. Remember that in the first century, these descriptions of the people in Levi's house are not necessarily moral judgments as much as social and political classifications. These tax collectors and sinners in Levi's home would be welcomed nowhere else in the community. These outsiders banded together, only reinforcing their lack of belonging to the surrounding villages and towns. At best, they were unclean because of their associations with the Romans, and at worst, they are traitors because they continue to collude with the enemy.

Jesus is at the center of all of this, knowing full well the boundaries that he is crossing as he sits with the guests at the meal. Those outside, watching from a distance grumble about how Jesus should know better. Note also that those outside the party, the Pharisees and scribes, are the ones who name Jesus's current social group "tax collectors and sinners." This is the first time in Luke that we meet the Pharisees. We must remember that unlike the Sadducees and ruling religious authorities of Jerusalem, the Pharisees are a renewal or reformation movement within Judaism, most popular and powerful among the people outside of Jerusalem. However, they have no formal authority of any kind. They have only wandered the countryside and rural parts of Palestine, calling the people of Israel to an even stricter adherence to the Torah, or law of Moses. They are a religious and political pressure group, attempting to purify the people in preparation for Messiah, the coming kingdom of God, yet abysmally unaware of the kingdom come among them in Jesus.

I wonder if Jesus stands at the entrance of Levi's house, receiving each guest while also noticing the gathering crowd who look on and grumble. I sense Jesus's growing irritation with the scribes and Pharisees. Then Jesus responds, "Those who are well have no need of a

physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance." Or maybe in our contemporary language: "Those who have realized their need for healing, those who have owned their brokenness and sickness, are those that need a doctor. Those who already think that they are righteous have no need of repentance until they have realized that they are sinners too." I wonder if Jesus's words mean anything to them.

The Pharisees' next question might reveal their true concern or maybe it is just a distraction from the truth of what Jesus has already said: how can you and your disciples be celebrating rather than fasting and praying as we all do? This question should remind us, pique our memory of the wedding at Cana, the moment when more wine is provided for the celebration because the God of Israel is doing something new through the son of Mary from Nazareth. Remember that the Pharisees, the scribes, the disciples of John, and most of the rest of the Jewish nation are all abundantly aware of the continued plight of exile, of judgment, of hopelessness. They all fast and pray because they are anticipating the arrival of God's kingdom as promised by the prophets long ago, but nothing of the present moment tells them that now is that moment. The Romans still own their lives, the authorities in Jerusalem are still imposters bent on their own gain at the expense of their people, and the temple system has strayed so far from God's ways that it may as well be abandoned altogether.

In some ways the Pharisees and scribes are asking Jesus and the disciples what they know that they do not. In veiled terms, Jesus speaks of his own presence with them as the bridegroom, again using the imagery from the wedding at Cana. While the bridegroom is present, celebration, liberation, healing, restoration, and redemption will be the norms of life in the kingdom, at least until the bridegroom is gone, another cryptic reference to Jesus's future passion experience in Jerusalem. Finally, in case Jesus hasn't been vague enough, he adds a parable, a story that will

bring clarity to those with ears to hear while also bringing further confusion to those whose ears are shut up to the fresh word that Jesus is bringing. Like new wine and new clothes, the kingdom must be taken in on its own terms, not on the terms that the Pharisees have already created out of their zeal for the Torah. If not taken on its own terms, then the new wine will burst the old wineskin and the cloth from the new clothes will not match the old clothes. In other words, the worldview that they currently hold about the way that the world works in terms of clean/unclean, sin/righteousness, pure/impure will not be able to hold the teaching that Jesus is trying to exemplify for and show to them even in this moment at Levi's house.

In the last verse of the chapter then, Jesus lays claim to the ancient purposes of God, the ways that stretch back to the beginning, to the first moments of covenant and relationship. The old wine, the true ways of the God of Israel are still better than whatever the Pharisees or other religious leaders are offering. Those who drink from the old wine, which Jesus had just called "new" in the verses before will know right away that it is good. They will realize that the new wine of Jesus's life and teaching is really an ancient, aged wine that fills the hearer and follower with good things, freeing them from the burden of the Pharisees' ritual purity.

So why would I keep the same title for this story as the story about Peter, James, and John? First, I did so to show that Jesus chose and called Levi just as much as Jesus chose and called the other 3 disciples, though we may know the first story better. In these initial moments of Jesus' ministry, his audiences continue to think that they know who is in and who is out, who is welcome and who is not, only to have their point of view broken down by Messiah. This moment is more than difficult for us when we like to think that we have God figured out as well as those whom God has welcomed. However, Jesus will not stop there; Jesus will not let us settle on idealistic notions of inclusion as though all we need to say is that all are welcome. No, Jesus

requires that we come face-to-face with our own prejudices and judgments as he does with his other disciples. When we respond to Jesus' calling on our lives and choose to follow him, we will find ourselves in moments just like Peter, James, and John, sitting at the table with those whom we never expected to join in the kingdom. Yet, they will begin to embody this new kingdom, this ancient wine, this new clothing as a community of Messiah followers soon, but not yet. Will you do the same even when fellow followers of Jesus test your limits and your patience with their different ways of seeing the world? Maybe in our cooperation with those who are also called and chosen, yet not like us, we will begin to see glimpses of the kingdom come.

Closing Prayer:

Let us pray: awesome God, you have called and chosen each of us as your image-bearers to live into the will and way of Jesus in each day. Open our eyes to see how you are working in every person's life, calling each one to intimate and hope-filled relationship in Christ. Give us gracious and generous hearts as we welcome even those whom we struggle to envision in your family. In Jesus name. Amen.