

Lysa TerKeurst has written a book in which the title alone says a lot. It's called, *Uninvited: Living loved when you feel less than, left out, and lonely*. That says a lot, doesn't it? We all know that feeling of being uninvited. And now in our world of social media, we get to see our friends and all the wonderful events we weren't invited to! In her book Lysa says, "Today's rejections, big or subtle, are like stealth bombs that zing straight to my core, locating hurts from my past and making them agonizingly present all over again." Again, we've all been there. We all know the feeling of being an outsider surrounded by insiders.

And we all deal with that reality in different ways. Some live their whole lives plotting ways to get on the inside. Others become calloused and decide it doesn't really matter because they're all a bunch of shallow jerks anyway. Still others just create their own band of insiders, organized around a whole different set of rules that define who's in and who's out.

One of the most powerful arenas in which there are insiders and outsiders is that of religion. Religious people (church people) believe we're called to be different from the world. So, sometimes without even knowing it, we create a religious subculture that defines us as different from outsiders. Within this subculture there are "boundary markers" that separate the outsiders from the insiders. It might be how we dress, how we talk, where we hang out, and what we choose for entertainment.

For example, when I was a new believer I grew my hair out, drove a VW bus with a "Honk if you love Jesus" sticker on the back, and wore a lot of flannel. I retreated from my non-Christian friends. I gave the "one way" sign whenever I spotted another Jesus freak. I didn't know it, but I was drawing my own lines of who was in and who was out.

In the first century A.D. the Jewish people had a lot of boundary markers that served to distinguish between insiders and outsiders. Much of the rabbinic writing focused on things like circumcision, dietary laws, Sabbath keeping and fasting. That's a bit odd because all rabbis knew at the heart of the law were these words: "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*" (Deut. 6:4-5). But instead of focusing on loving God they focused on these highly visible and superficial practices that allowed them to differentiate between who was inside and outside the family of God.

This is why Jesus was in so much hot water with the religious leaders. He often crossed the boundary markers. Sometimes he'd seem to ignore them altogether in his own practices. At other times he'd treat clear-cut outsiders like they were insiders. It was all very offensive and even threatening to the religious leaders.

Today we're looking at three stories in which Jesus erases the normal boundary markers and **invites** those who are normally **uninvited** to be in relationship with him. He makes outsiders insiders. And in each story he takes a fair amount of flack for doing so.

Jesus Heals a Paralyzed Man

In the first story, Jesus and his disciples sail from the east side of the Sea of Galilee to what had become his adopted home town of Capernaum. Look what happens.

Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."

At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!"

Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "Get up, take your mat and go home." Then the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to man. (Matt. 9:1-8)

This story is also found in both Mark and Luke's gospel. Both Mark and Luke add a detail about what happened that Matthew omits in order to concentrate not so much on their actions but on what Jesus says. They tell us Jesus is teaching in a house and so many people crowd around him no one can get to him. So these men climb onto the roof, remove the tiles, and lower their paralyzed friend on a mat directly in front of Jesus. No doubt Jesus stopped teaching and everyone waited breathlessly to see what he'd do.

Matthew mentions how Jesus "saw their faith." Like the leper and the centurion in chapter 8, these men believed Jesus could heal. Why else would they go to such trouble to bring their friend to him? Faith isn't so much what you feel or even say you believe about Jesus, but how you actually respond to him—what you do. And we know if there's anything that impresses Jesus it's this—faith.

He sees their faith but then he focuses on the man lying on the mat. He sees how apprehensive and perhaps even terrified he is, so his first words are reassuring, "Take heart, son." In other words, "Don't be afraid. I'm not here to hurt you or condemn you. I care about you. Everything will be okay."

It's important to realize something at this point. This man was an outsider. In that day disabled people were social outcasts. There were no building codes for wheelchair accessibility; no handicapped parking places. Paralytics were lonely, helpless and hurting men and women. So, again, he's an outsider, especially to religious people. But not to Jesus.

With hardly a pause, Jesus boldly says, "...your sins are forgiven." Wait a minute, did he say what I think he said? What a strange thing to say! The paralyzed man certainly has his hopes up, and this is what he gets? How would you like to be rushed to the ER with some urgent illness, finally get to see the doctor, and then have him say, "Take heart, your sins are forgiven"? And think of these friends. These guys have gone to a lot of trouble, they have a great plan, and then Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven." It's not what any of them had in mind. I can just see them all looking at each other, "What did he say? He said his sins are forgiven. Oh, nice! Thanks a lot. He could have just shouted that out the window!"

In verse 3 the focus shifts to those watching. The religious leaders are sitting there thinking, "He can't do that. That's blasphemy. Only God can forgive sins. He's saying he's equal with God! He should be stoned." In certain respects they're right. Only God **can** forgive sins. So why **did** Jesus say this? I don't believe he was saying this guy was paralyzed as a punishment for some sin, as many would have thought. In John 9 Jesus refutes the idea that disease is directly linked to personal sin. I'd suggest two reasons Jesus said this.

First, he pronounces forgiveness right away so he can confront his critics with the implications of the healing he's about to perform. He knows what they're thinking, so he confronts them, "Why are you thinking such evil thoughts? Which is easier to say, 'Your sins have been forgiven you,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?'" Which is easier to say? Anyone can say, "Your sins are forgiven," but there's no way of knowing if they have the authority to do it. But if someone says to a paralytic, "Get up and walk," we know immediately whether they're for real. If the man gets up, Jesus is the real deal. So, in essence, he says, "I'll do the harder thing so you know I have the authority to do the easier thing. I'll heal the man so you know I have the authority to forgive the man." With that he commands the paralytic to rise, take up his mat, and go home. And that's just what he does.

So what does this prove? It proves Jesus **does** have the authority to forgive sins, because he **is** God. And it proves the kingdom of heaven indeed had come in the person of Jesus, but it seems to be coming for all the wrong people.

The second reason Jesus pronounced forgiveness first is because even though the man was paralyzed, Jesus knew he had an even deeper need. What was it? He needed forgiveness. He saw beneath the surface to the greater need. What good would it do for him to be able to walk but spend eternity in hell? Jesus met his greatest need first. Sometimes our felt needs aren't our greatest needs. This man went home a changed person not just because he could walk, but because the burden of sin had been lifted off his back! I hear people say all the time, "Well, your health is really the most important thing." But is it really? What does it profit a person if he gains perfect health but loses his soul? I guess it really depends, doesn't it. If you feel the dreadful consequences of sin in your relationship with God, then nothing will be more important to you than forgiveness. And it seems here the outsiders are more likely than the insiders to understand this.

The Calling of Matthew

The second story confirms that. Here, Matthew reflects on his own calling as a disciple of Jesus. And everything we've learned about Jesus' authority to forgive sin carries over into this next story. Look what happens.

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (verses 9-13)

Tax collectors were the ultimate outsiders in Jewish society. Most of them were wealthy Jews who'd sold out to the Romans. They made their money by extortion. They were the most hated men in Jewish society. They weren't allowed to serve in court as witnesses. They were excommunicated from the synagogue. But out of the blue Jesus calls this tax collector to follow him. And he does! He drops everything and follows Jesus. With just a word Jesus healed the paralytic, and now with a word he commands a scoundrel to a whole new life and he obeys.

My daughter Kim and her husband gave me an Amazon Alexa for Christmas. It's pretty amazing. Alexa pretty much does whatever I tell her to do. "Alexa, play James Taylor," and she does! "Alexa, tell me who won the Super Bowl in 2002," and she tells me. I have a lot of authority with Alexa! Jesus is like that. He commands a paralytic to get up and walk and he does! He even commands a tax collector to follow him, and he does! This is a big deal for Matthew. He's leaving everything. He's giving up a lucrative job. He'll never get it back, and he'll never get employed somewhere else. Who'd hire a former tax collector? This shows complete trust in Jesus.

But he doesn't just leave everything and follow Jesus. He also throws a party to celebrate. It's almost like he can't help himself. He leaves everything, not with grim resignation, but with the desire to celebrate. And it's a party for all his fellow outsiders. These are men and women who basically blew off the OT law, along with all the boundary markers of the religious leaders. Much like the friends of the paralytic who brought their friend to Jesus, Matthew can't wait to introduce his spiritually paralyzed friends to Jesus as well. By the way, new believers are often times the best evangelists. Why? Not only because they can't help but share their joy with unbelieving friends, but because they still have unbelieving friends! They haven't become so entrenched in all the boundary markers of a Christian subculture they still have those connections.

But "every party has a pooper," right? While all the outsiders are celebrating, the insiders are watching. The Pharisees would never think of entering a man like Matthew's home, so they probably sent someone in to question Jesus' disciples, "What's going on here? Why does your teacher eat with these losers?" This wasn't a question but an accusation. In that culture to go to a person's home and share a meal was a sign of intimacy and acceptance. To be the guest of a sinner certainly disqualified a man from being a Rabbi.

It's interesting to me how Matthew, who's writing all of this, doesn't seem to mind being lumped together with sinners. He's doing the same thing Rembrandt did in one of his most famous paintings of the crucifixion. He portrayed all the characters you'd expect in such a scene: Jesus, the two thieves, the soldiers, a large crowd of onlookers who hurled insults at him. But down in the corner of the painting, as one who shared in the guilt of the crucifixion, Rembrandt painted a portrait of himself. That's what Matthew does here: he paints himself in the picture. He's one of the sinners, he's one of the outsiders who Jesus welcomed.

Then word gets back to Jesus of what they're saying, and he responds with an illustration and a quotation from the OT. The illustration is drawn from the world of medicine. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." It's interesting, today, if you're sick, you normally **go** to the doctor, or **go** the hospital. But in Jesus' day there were no hospitals or doctor's offices. Doctors **go** to the patients. They made house calls. So Jesus draws on this custom to explain that as a doctor of the soul he needed to **go** where the spiritually sick people were. That's why he makes a house call to see Matthew. And there were a lot of sick people there! It's like an ER room. But where else should he be? He's a physician of the soul. He's just doing his job. Of course, he wasn't saying the religious leaders were spiritually healthy. In fact, they were as sinful as Matthew and his friends, they just didn't know it.

Then Jesus quotes from the OT prophet Hosea, where God said, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." I like how *The Message* translates this, "I desire mercy, not religion." Hosea was attacking the false

and formal religion of his day in which people professed to follow God and went through all the outward motions of religion but missed the things God really cares about—mercy, love and justice.

Jesus applies this saying to his own ministry and says, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." And when he says, "righteous," he means those who **think** they're righteous because of their religion. Today we're baptizing several people in this church who've come to Christ. This is **not** a religious exercise they do to show how righteous they are. This is **not** a badge they'll wear to show off their spiritual superiority. This is an outward sign of their faith in Jesus who saves them from their sin. This is them painting themselves into the picture of the crucifixion.

And yet this statement from Jesus also implies they **will** change. If Jesus is a spiritual doctor who treats sinners, the implication is they **will** get healthy; they won't continue to wallow in sin. They **will** hunger and thirst for righteousness. They **will** learn to love God with all their hearts and love their neighbor as themselves. The good doctor, Jesus, doesn't leave us sick in our sin, but begins the process of transformation from the inside out.

The Disciples of John

The final of the three stories follows. Here the criticism comes not from the religious leaders but from the disciples of John the Baptist. Remember, John is in prison, or perhaps already martyred by now. And even though John tried to point his disciples to Jesus, there are still those who identify with John.

Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"

Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved." (verses 14-17)

It's important to see how this third story relates to the one prior to it. Jesus may very well have still been at Matthew's house. And what's he doing there? He's eating; he's feasting. The Pharisees come along and say, "Why is he eating with sinners?" Then the disciples of John come along and say, "Why is he eating at all?" Later in 11:18-19a Jesus will say this, "*For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'* *The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'*" So you're darned if you do, and darned if you don't!

John the Baptist was what we call an ascetic. His ministry was all about repentance from sin and his lifestyle embodied that. He lived in the wilderness, renounced material possessions, and

practiced rigid disciplines of prayer and fasting. And it's not that Jesus never did that. We saw how he fasted for 40 days in the wilderness. We saw how he often had nowhere to even lay his head at night. Nevertheless, Jesus didn't go far enough in the eyes of John's disciples. He and his followers didn't live up to the standards of John or the Pharisees. Even though the law only required fasting one day a year on the Day of Atonement, the Pharisees fasted twice a week—Mondays and Thursdays—so maybe this was a Thursday night and he's feasting and in their minds he should have been fasting.

So here's another boundary marker: fasting. Along with other spiritual disciplines like prayer, solitude, tithing, and Bible reading these can be helpful things as we seek to grow in Christ. But they can also become legalistic practices that create spiritual pride and, again, function as boundary markers that differentiate between outsiders and insiders.

Jesus answers their question with two mini parables. In the first one, he likens himself to a bridegroom about to be married. Lynn and I have done a lot of premarital counseling together over the years. It's something we've always enjoyed because it's such an important time in a couple's life. Of course, they always want to talk about the wedding, but we always say we want to focus first on the marriage, then we'll get to the wedding. But when we do get to the wedding it's always fun. I've never been to a sad wedding. Imagine going to a wedding and having the parents of the bride announce to everyone at the ceremony there'd be no food or drink. Instead they'd like everyone to fast! How would you feel about that? Do you see what Jesus is saying? It's not time to fast, it's time to celebrate. I'm here. The kingdom of heaven has arrived. It's not a time to fast, but to celebrate.

Of course, this is looking forward to another feast. Remember, Jesus spoke about that feast back in chapter 8 when he said, *"many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven"* (8:11). So this picture of the bridegroom coming for his bride ultimately looks forward to the great marriage feast in heaven, and here we see there will be a lot of outsiders at that table.

In the second parable Jesus is saying he came to bring in something brand new—the good news of the gospel and all that it accomplishes in our lives. You can't take the old ways of legalistic Judaism and patch it together with something new. You can't take a new, un-shrunk piece of cloth and sew it on an old pair of pants. You'll rip the pants! You can't take new wine and put it in old wineskins. The wineskins will burst! Jesus brought something new and the old rituals of Judaism can't contain it.

He didn't come to just patch up the old system of the law. He didn't come to put a new spin on old religion. He came to do something entirely new. There's something new happening in the world through Jesus, and it calls for a new way to live. And guess what? That's good news for outsiders! That's good news for all these men and women who reclined around the table that night with Jesus at Matthew's house.

How can we join with Jesus to see outsiders become insiders? Who are your outsiders? We miss living like Jesus because we avoid the people Jesus invited in and welcomed. What barriers do we have as a church that make it difficult for outsiders to become insiders? How can we create an environment where everyone feels invited? This is why one of our core values as a church is grace. We want to be a place where lost, hurting, and broken people are welcome because Jesus came to seek the lost, heal the brokenhearted, and transform lives.

Three stories. Three stories where Jesus welcomes the uninvited. Three stories where he invites outsiders to become insiders. Three stories where the insiders resented that. How do these stories intersect with your story? If you were to paint yourself in this story, where would you be?

Would you be lying on the mat, waiting to be healed, but really needing something far greater—the forgiveness of your sins? Or would you be on the side wondering, "Who gave him the authority to do that?"

Would you be sitting at the tax booth, hearing the call of Jesus to leave everything and follow him? Or would you say, "Maybe later," and stay put, holding tightly to those things which in the end will perish?

Would you be at Matthew's house, sitting around the table, laughing, maybe even crying tears of joy, feasting with the physician of your soul? Or would you be standing outside mumbling something about how bad friends corrupt good morals? Or wondering, with John's disciples, why everyone is having so much fun when religion is such serious business?

Lord, we come before you, and some of us are humbled, seeing in ourselves more of the religious leaders than we'd like to admit. Would you help us to be more like Jesus. Some of us are just beginning to realize that you came precisely for those who are sick with sin and who know it. You came to offer forgiveness to those who stand outside of your grace. You came to offer joy and freedom to those saddened and shackled by sin. So we come to you today both humbled and eager to follow you like Matthew, inviting and welcoming others to join us at the table. Amen.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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