

“No Divisions”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, November 12, 2017

D Min Sermon #2, Year 1  
Mark 2:13-17

The Whitchurch-Stouffville Town website states: “Whitchurch-Stouffville is the second fastest growing municipality in Ontario and the third fastest growing community in the country according to the latest Statistics Canada Census data. The 2011 Census showed that Stouffville grew 54.3% between 2006 and 2011.

Just walk along Main Street and there is ample evidence of this – from the tall building crane hovering above the Pace on Main Condo development, to the Pentecostal and Mar Thoma Churches being built in the Industrial fields to the West. Soon to come is the Longo’s Development, which will include a Good Life Fitness and other stores.

From where our church sits in the heart of the oldest part of Stouffville, new subdivisions push out to the north, south, east and west. The town logo is ‘Country Close to the City’ but the concept is somewhat challenged now because the countryside is going to development. And people say, ‘Growth is good!’

Last week’s Sun-Tribune newspaper surprised me with its Letter to the Editor that angrily lamented that Stouffville has changed for the worse. They wrote, “Who puts a brand new condominium in the middle of a town that has been in existence since 1804? The amount of development here means that Stouffville no longer qualifies for ‘Country Close to the City’.”<sup>1</sup>

The front page headline continued on a similar theme: “Stucco on Main Street causes stir”<sup>2</sup>. Said stucco is around the corner from our church, the front of the old ‘Curves’ building, part of a major renovation to a building that was falling apart. The article continued, “You don’t expect a developer to come into an early 1900’s building and put stucco on a historic front. It’s going to look like garbage.”<sup>3</sup>

And the very next day, someone vandalized the building, spraying the stucco with black paint in capitalized letters, ‘IT LOOKS LIKE GARBAGE’.

Looks like there’s division in the community of Stouffville between those who consider themselves old Stouffville, and those who are newcomers to Stouffville who are bringing with them obviously unwelcome growth and change.

The Town of Capernaum was on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus made this his home town and it was the scene of many of his miracles and teachings. He would teach at the synagogue. And it was here that Levi had his tax booth, collecting road tolls from travelers.

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<sup>1</sup> Stouffville Sun-Tribune, Thursday, November 2, 2017, p 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

And as we learn in this text, there are different groups of Jews in Capernaum, each with their own distinctiveness.

The Pharisees are a small religious sect that distinguish themselves from other Jews by their strict following of the Purity codes, a great deal of which comes from the Book of Leviticus. For example, they could not eat with a non-Pharisee in case the food had not been tithed (i.e. one tenth given to God).<sup>4</sup>

By observing the purity laws, Jews were set apart from other cultures and social practices.<sup>5</sup> The observance of purity laws reflected the holiness of God in the people, “For I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.” (Leviticus 11:44) The Pharisees were the ‘rule police’ of the Jewish culture, reprimanding Jews who violated the purity codes.

The other group of Jews in our text are the tax collectors. The Pharisees declared tax collectors as ‘unclean’ because they dealt with money that had been handled by the Gentiles or Non-Jews. Tax collectors were forbidden to attend worship in the temple because they were ‘unclean’.

And then Jesus shows up. Jesus comes along and will break the rules, rules like working on the Sabbath, and touching unclean people. And suddenly there is division in the community.

And here he is at Levi’s house, eating with unclean people, a whole room full of them. The Pharisees are outside Levi’s door, incensed by Jesus’ actions, and asking the disciples ‘why is he eating with tax collectors and sinners?’

It made me think of ways in which we create division in our world because we can’t sit at the same table together. We know division and its impact on our lives, our families, our communities. We’ve experienced its wrenching emotions. We’ve suffered its devastating consequences.

In a church I pastored, division struck. It was a case of a law suit between two of the ‘founding’ families of that church. For the longest time, during the court case, the families were present at worship, one family on one side of the church, the other family on the other side of the church. When it was Holy Communion, the families would follow each other up the center aisle to receive communion and everything held together.

But one day, the fragility of the peace broke and was smashed to pieces. A torrent of anger swirled in where peace had prevailed and everything that had held together fell apart.

It split my heart in two. Division is real and causes great suffering.

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<sup>4</sup> David Alexander and Pat Alexander, Ed., *Eerdmans Handbook to the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 494.

<sup>5</sup> David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, General Editors, *Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 1*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 404.

Upon reflection, it was remarkable how the peace held when we were there for communion, when we came to the table to receive communion, the two families and everyone else. There is a leveling when we come to the table. Division takes a back seat.

A commentary suggests: “Jesus’ table fellowship reveals a God who welcomes all of us without reference to our social status. Where we were born, who our parents are, our physical appearance, how many degrees we hold, how much money we make, what we have accomplished in life, how old or healthy we are – these are not criteria for receiving God’s interest and compassion. All of us are welcome at God’s table. *And so is everyone else.*”<sup>6</sup>

I want to ask you a question. ‘Who are the people that you would be most reluctant to sit with at that table in Levi’s house *because they are not like you?*’

Picture the people who you see in real life and in the media. Stretch your imagination. A few stereotypes come to mind: drug addicts, prostitutes, punks, those guys who wear their pants down to their knees, homeless people on city heat grids, people from other cultures who speak different languages, that person you can’t get along with.

Now imagine *those* people answering the question: Who are the people that I would be most reluctant to sit with at that table in Levi’s house because they are just not like me? “– and they picture you. ***Are you starting to ‘get’ now what was happening at that table in Levi’s house?*** You are at the table, and so is everyone else.

***In all of history, there isn’t a more level playing field than that table that Jesus sat at in Levi’s house.*** We will often throw out the phrase, ‘oh they’re on a level playing field’, as if to say that two people who are adversarial are now on an equal basis. But it’s not always that simple.

Think of two high school sports teams, one is a poorly funded Public High School and one is from a Private High School. The Private High School team has top-of-the-line equipment, superior training, and a high protein diet. The Public High School team has second hand equipment, little or no training facilities, and zero protein in their diet. Is this a level playing field? There is an imbalance.<sup>7</sup>

But at the table where Jesus sits, with Levi, and the disciples and the prostitutes, and the tax collectors and the sinners, there is no imbalance. It is a table where no one has an advantage over another because this is truly even ground.

*Everyone* came through the door in Levi’s house, past the sign that says, ‘Sinners Wanted: Inquire Within’. And as Jesus continues his ministry, others will sit at the table with him - Nicodemus and Zacchaeus. Even Judas, the one who will betray him, will eat at his table.

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> ACTS D Min of Preaching Class Notes from Core 1: Preaching as Celebration, Monday June 26, 2017, Lecturer: Dr. Frank Thomas

Jesus said, "I have come not to call the righteous but sinners." I saw the sign 'Sinners Wanted: inquire Within' on Google Images. And this seems to be the crux of the issue in Mark 2. When I see a sign like "Sinners Wanted: Inquire Within", I believe it's a sign everyone qualifies for, *even the righteous*.

So yesterday, I was walking along Hoover Park Drive and I saw Levi's house. And I saw that sign in the window, 'Sinners Wanted: Inquire Within' and so I knocked on the door and went in. There was a whole pile of people there. Levi, the owner of the pawn shop in town, and the staff at the Money Mart were there.

The first thing I noticed is how relaxed everyone was, sitting around a very large table in the middle of the room. A bunch of chairs were pushed up to the table. It was an old farm kitchen table, with its worn blue paint, and someone had added a bunch of 'leaves' into its center to make it long enough for all the chairs.

I chose a chair and pulled up to the table. There were lots of conversations going on at the table and I tried to listen to all of them. I placed my hands on the worn table top and I could feel the sleeve of my neighbour brush on me, we were all sitting so close together.

I could smell the freshly baked bread that was sitting on the table and watched as a mug of wine was poured for me from the earthen pitcher on the table. I raised it to my mouth and I tasted its cool grapiness on my tongue.

But I have missed the most important detail of all. The man sitting across from me. Jesus.

And I knew - *this is why we are all in this room*. His presence fills this place. I get why we are all here. It's as if he has removed the outer selves we wear and placed it like a jacket on the seat behind us and we are revealed for who we are.

*Pure and lovely. Forgiven and free.*

Each one of us the same. You. Me.  
The Tax Collector. The Prostitute. The Sinner.

*I know* the righteous standing outside on the sidewalk have sure missed out on something.

Anyone who is on a journey of faith is welcome at Jesus' table. Jesus' table is not for 'members only' but for everyone who comes and enters in.

There is no division at Jesus' table.

There is only community for all.

So let's go on down to Levi's house.  
On Hoover Park Drive.  
And let's go in.

And you will see the sign:  
    Sinners Wanted: Inquire Within.  
And you will go in  
    because you know you're no saint.

And you will see the people.  
And you will see the bread.  
And you will see the cup of wine poured out for you at the table.

*You will see Jesus.*

And at the table,  
    there is no division.

And at the table,  
    there is community.

At Jesus' table, there is community for all.

Praise be to God. Amen.