

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
October 19 & 20, 2013
Steph Spencer
REGROUP: Jesus' Community
Matthew 9:9-13**

Welcome to CPC. My name is Stephanie Spencer and I'm on staff with The Table at the Sunday evening service so it's nice to be here with you in the morning for a change. I'm excited to close out our series on community that John [Pastor John Crosby] began for us. I'm going to ask you to do something this morning. It might be a little stretching. I know it's the morning and we might all want our own space, but I'm going to ask you to talk to each other for a minute, so kind of prep yourself right now and I'll explain what you are going to talk about.

I want to talk for a little bit about Facebook. This is a picture of my Facebook profile page and I have to say, part of this is just an excuse for me to show you that picture of my three-year-old because I do think it's about the cutest picture of a three-year-old that ever existed! It's my cover photo. In fairness to my seven-year-old, I do have another child as well who is not pictured here. But, I'd like to know how many Facebook friends you have. Do you have between one and 200 Facebook friends? Do you have between 200 and 500 Facebook friends? Do you have over 500 Facebook friends? Do you have absolutely no idea how many Facebook friends you have or are you one of those holdouts who are still not on Facebook? I want you to find someone next to you, maybe it is someone you came with, maybe it is someone nearby, and especially if your answer is that you are not on Facebook yet, maybe talk about why—whether it's because you hate computers or because no one you know is on it or because you just really could care less about it, whatever it might be. So, find someone next to you and talk about your Facebook friends for just a minute or two, please.

Actually, while you are still talking to each other, I want to say that this is exactly the way I hoped this would go because after all, this is a series on community. I am really curious, how many people in this room are still not on Facebook? Would you mind raising your hands? Look around this room. That's amazing. Some people who are on Facebook I think are cheering, "Good for you. Don't go over to the dark side." Others are finding camaraderie in the fact that there are still people not on it.

For those of you who don't know, if you aren't on Facebook, you probably realize this and for sure you realize this if you are on Facebook, Facebook is this large social network of people you have met at some point in your lives who decide to be Facebook friends with you. People you know from high school, people you met once in the grocery store. There can be a huge variety of people who are your Facebook friends. In full disclosure, I didn't know the answer to that question of how many Facebook friends I have until I prepped with my little picture and found out my answer is between 200 and 500, just so you know something about me. But if I was given a piece of paper and asked to write down the names of all those Facebook friends, I have

a feeling I would get to maybe 30 and then I would start to blank out on who else is there because it's such a wide social network of people.

What we are talking about in our community series is not that wide group of people we have met at some point in our lives, but closer friends. We are talking about that inner circle, that network of people who know us, who are with us in our lives, who are ready to go to bat for us if something happens and know us in a much deeper way than those Facebook status updates. When I think about where in the Bible we see that kind of community, that type of inner circle, my mind goes to the disciples of Jesus. This close group of people who were with Jesus, who spent time together and traveled together, some might consider to be the first small group. I want to see what we can learn about community through Jesus' disciples. We are going to look at several Scripture passages this morning. If you would like to follow along, we are going to start in Matthew, chapter 4, which is on page 1,439 in the Bibles in the pews in front of you. It will also be up on the screen. We are going to look first at the call of Peter since he is about one of the most famous disciples and see what happens as Jesus starts to bring these followers around Him.

18 As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. **19** "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."

20 At once they left their nets and followed him. **21** Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, **22** and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

I don't know if you caught this when you were reading with me but these first four who Jesus called—Peter, Andrew, James, and John—they knew each other. They were two sets of brothers so they already had that close relationship. James and John were just a little further down the lake from Peter and Andrew when they were called, so at the very least, these two sets of brothers would have been acquaintances, already co-workers or even closer friends than that. They had this opportunity to not only to follow this dynamic leader, Jesus, but to do it with people they knew and have the joy of trying to figure out who Jesus might be and go on this adventurous journey together.

Things start out pretty amazingly for these four. Jesus has these lessons that He teaches that draw huge crowds. He is healing people who are sick. He is doing these miracles, and these four are like, "Wow, this is an amazing thing!" Not long after this comes the passage John [John Crosby] used to kick off this series, the healing of the paralytic man. Some amazing things going on with these friends as they are together with Jesus.

A lot of us start out our journey of faith that way. Maybe we are brought to church by our friends or maybe by our families. We start out with this group of people we already know. When these four, Peter, Andrew, James, and John, decide to follow Jesus, they kind of lost control of what Jesus might do next. They are along for the ride. Then Jesus called someone who might not have been their first choice of someone to hang out with. This takes place in Matthew, chapter 9, but instead of reading it, let's watch the scene together that was shown in the Bible mini-series on the History Channel on TV this spring. This story really paints the picture of what this scene might have been like when Jesus called Matthew to follow him. Let's take a look.

[Film clip shown.]

Now, before I go any further in my talk, I want to pause because I think some people in this room might be deeply identifying with the tears of Matthew. I want you to know that no matter what is going on in your life, no matter what background you have, no matter what baggage you bring with you, no matter how left out you may have felt in the past, Jesus calls out to you with His love and says, "Come. Be with Me. I love you right now just the way you are. No changes required. Just come and be with Me and accept My love and grace." If you are in that place where that's hard for you to fathom this morning and you are thinking about what it would have been like to be Matthew in that scene, just ignore the rest of my talk and stay in that place and feel those feelings of Jesus reaching out to you in love and saying, "Come and be with Me."

When I've thought about this theme before, I've often thought about it from the perspective of how amazing it is to see that Jesus is so welcoming and so inclusive and so invitational toward all people, no matter what has been a part of their lives in the past. But rarely have I viewed this scene from the perspective of Peter. I don't know if you noticed in the beginning of that film clip that it was actually Peter and another disciple who, when they walked into that village, said, "Uhhh, collaborators. Ignore them!" Their first response to tax collectors was to avoid them and that makes sense because in the Talmud, tax collectors were actually put on par with murderers and thieves. In this day and age, we often don't realize how deep this history of disdain against tax collectors went because these were Jewish people working for the Roman oppressors of the Jewish people. They were traitors. They were collecting money on behalf of those who were hurting their fellow people and they were deeply hated.

Also interesting to me is that this scene takes place in Capernaum, which is where Peter, Andrew, James, and John are from. Matthew would have been some sort of toll collector who took a portion of peoples' commodities as they passed through. This means if he were in the same region as these four we read about earlier, he was not a stranger to them. In the past Peter, Andrew, James, and John probably had to pay either Matthew or someone sitting next to Matthew when they traveled. He was not a random tax collector from a faraway region. He was one of *their* tax collectors. He was one of *their* direct enemies and when Jesus says to Matthew, "Come and follow Me," Peter, Andrew, James, and John, if they want to still be with Jesus, they have to let Matthew join their group. Right after Matthew was called, the scene continues in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 9, on page 1,448 in your Bibles if you would like to follow along. Matthew has a dinner and it says,

10 While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. **11** When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" **12** On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. **13** But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus and His disciples are being judged for being with Matthew, but Jesus clearly doesn't care. He doesn't care one bit. In fact, Jesus uses this as an example of something He can teach the Pharisees about, what it means to love people who are different from us. This is what Jesus is calling us to, to love not only the people we like to hang out with, but people who annoy us, people who are hard to love, people who make us angry, people who are different from us, people whose Facebook friends' requests we would reject if they asked us. Jesus is saying,

“You welcome them into your circle because I welcome them into My circle. You are called to love like I love.”

Jesus is saying that He calls sinners, which means one of the first places we have to start is to say if we are with Jesus, we are a sinner. We are right on par with anybody else who is with Jesus. We are all broken. But still at this point, if you are Peter, Andrew, James and John, maybe you are thinking, “Okay. One dinner with Matthew. I can handle that. One dinner. We can sit on opposite sides of the table and maybe he can kind of be one of those outskirts people. Jesus always calls crowds. He can be way out there in the background. We’ll sit on the other side, and we’ll kind of love him from a distance and that will be enough and we will figure that out together.” But then Jesus actually named who His twelve disciples will be. Matthew, chapter 10, verse 2.

2 These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; **3** Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; **4** Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Matthew did not stay did on the distant edges of this community. Matthew is brought right into the center, the core of who was with Jesus, who was together with Him. This was not just one meal. It was years of journeying together, eating side by side, sleeping and moving together. This was a deep community of followers. What I love there, too, is that we see Simon the Zealot called into the same group of people. A zealot would have been someone who was violently opposed to Rome, who would have fought against oppression from Rome, so Matthew would have been a huge enemy to Simon the Zealot. Jesus pulls all of these people together into one community.

There is a tendency to think that when Jesus calls us to love our enemies, He is talking to us about loving the people out *there* who are hard to love, but then we come back to church and our small groups and safe people, who are easy to love, who can refresh us. Then we can go back out and love those to hard-to-love people once again. We see in the story of the disciples that Jesus just blows that idea right out of the water. He says, “No, no. I want you to bring those people in, not just in at a distance but into the center of your community.” What if Jesus is calling us to break down barriers in a way that we often easily forget and take for granted? What if Jesus is calling us to recklessly welcome others into our community? The definition of *reckless* is to be utterly unconcerned about the consequences of an action, utterly unconcerned about how we might be judged, about the energy it might take to love someone who is hard to love, about how it will stretch us and grow us. Utterly unconcerned about that because what we are concerned about is loving like Jesus loved and recklessly welcoming others. After all, how can we learn to love people if we don’t spend time with them, and how can we learn to love the people Jesus loved if we are not with them?

Here is another reality. For some people, we are the ones who are hard to love and if people didn’t practice this idea of welcoming others, we would have a hard time finding friends. To be honest, I learned about this when I spent a summer in Los Angeles. I was in college and decided to spend a summer working in the inner city of Los Angeles. [Photo shown.] This was 1999 so if the picture is a little grainy it’s because this was before digital cameras. That’s me on the lower right. I had this idea of what I was going to be doing when I decided to spend the summer in LA. I had this thought that I was going to go and do this great thing by loving people

who were hard to love, working in poor, inner city neighborhoods around LA. We went there to work in Skid Row and Compton and other neighborhoods that you've heard of even out here because they are so hard. We were going to go and help these people and love them.

I had this thought that what would happen was, I would go out there, and then I would go back to my group of college friends, who would be like these bonded, lifelong friends and we would do all these fun things together. We would go to Disneyland. We would go to the observatory and be friends, and then we would go out and love the people who were hard to love. And then we would come back and be friends. And then we would go out and love the people who were hard to love.

I discovered pretty quickly that the hardest people to love in LA were not the people we were planning on serving, but the people who were on the team with me because I didn't have control over who was there. I just signed up and followed God into some place that I thought He was calling me to go. On our team we had loads and loads of difficulty. The top row in that picture is the staff that was there with us. The way they ran the project was, they were with us for a period of time, but then they nominated people in the house to function in different leadership roles and they left and had us fend for ourselves as college students. A guy and I were the co-leaders of the house which meant that I was forced to do the things that nobody else wanted to do. I was forced to help people navigate all the stuff that began to crop up. I had to figure out how to love people, which really wasn't my choice. It wasn't like I was being so giving and understanding. It was because somebody made me to do it, really.

In this group were people who were racist, who didn't even realize they were racist until they were living in close proximity with someone of a different race. We had a girl in this group who had a terrible upbringing in the foster care system in Los Angeles and hadn't been back since. She struggled through her feelings the whole summer, having anger toward everyone and everything around her. We had a girl who was suicidal. We had college students who were just college students, who were selfish and just wanted to party and have fun and weren't willing to make the sacrifices necessary to be in community and serve. We had all these dynamics going on in the household. There was even a girl who was kind of bossy and thought she was in charge of things and maybe was hard for other people to love because of that [pointing to herself].

We had to figure out how to love each other and it was not easy. It was hard. We were forced to do this because, really, anything else we wanted to do wouldn't have been effective unless or until we could figure that out together. I was so enriched by that experience because of the way I learned to love people who were difficult to love, the way I learned to see things from other people's perspectives, the way I learned to navigate difficulties, the way being there stretched me and grew me. I learned to let go of control of whom I would be with on that adventure. I'm still Facebook friends with a lot of them today. I wouldn't have had the ability to do without the power of Jesus.

There aren't many places in life where we are pushed like that. We join clubs with people who have similar interests or similar political beliefs. We join together naturally with people who are like us, but Jesus calls us into community through Him to do something different, to be recklessly welcoming of people who are different from us and be a part of that same community together. God is calling people who follow Him to do something more than just hang out with people who are like ourselves. I love this quote from Dallas Willard. It says this:

God's aim in human history is the creation of an inclusive community of loving persons, with Himself included as its primary sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.

The whole idea of this view of community is that it is not something we can do with our own strength. It is something that we do by the power of God working in us and through us to love each other, and when we do that it glorifies God like nothing else can. So let's think about how we can do that as a community, **how we might become recklessly welcoming.**

Here's what I think you shouldn't do. Don't go into this week and find someone who really annoys you and be like, "Hey, I heard this sermon on loving people I don't like. How about how we go and have coffee?" That's probably not going to work out too well for you. So what are some things we could do? **Let's start outside of these walls.** What can we do to be recklessly welcoming of others when we are outside these walls? All of us, I bet, have someone we can think of in our lives who is our Matthew, who is that person at work who just drives us crazy or that family member who is just so hard to get along with. Or maybe someone who lives in our neighborhood whom we altogether avoid because we can't even imagine being in a relationship with that person. What would it look like if instead of keeping that person on the fringes, you would invite that person to your house for dinner or maybe invite that person to come to church and bring that person into this community with you? What would it look like to be reckless in the way that Jesus was reckless with His love with His invitations and welcoming of those who were hard to love?

Let's move inside these walls. I think most of us come to church the way I come to church—really excited to see the people I know. I'm excited to be in the Great Room and welcome my friends, "Oh, how was your week? How was that soccer game? How was this? How was that?" What would it look like to come to church with the eyes of a recklessly welcoming person and look for people who don't know anyone here, who are maybe sitting by themselves and say, "Hi, it's nice to meet you? Welcome into our community. We are so glad you are here"? Maybe even or especially if they look pretty different from you. This is something I've been trying to put into practice myself.

Let's move into small groups. Small groups are really the focus this month. I wonder how many of us have hesitated to sign up for a small group because of what we are talking about today. Maybe it's because you view yourself as Matthew, as someone who in no way would be welcome in a Christian community because if people really knew what you had going on, if they really knew you, they would reject you. What would it look like to go out into that Great Room today and take that risk and sign up and say, "I'm going to trust that through Jesus, maybe they *would* welcome me in? Maybe I *could* find community here." Or maybe you have been afraid to sign up because you have been afraid that that person who is hard to love might end up in the same group as you. What would it look like for you to take that risk and go out in that Great Room and sign up and say, "Even if I'm in a group with someone who is different from me, we'll figure that out together through the help of Christ"? Or maybe you are already in a small group and that group is struggling because there are people in the group who are hard to love. Maybe it's one person who kind of throws the group into turmoil. Or maybe it's the dynamic between a couple of people.

What I want to say to you is good job! That means you are doing something right because your group is not easy to get along with and Christ is shown in this deep way that is hard to show otherwise. If you need help in navigating through that, talk to someone in the Adult Ministries

department and get some help in figuring out how your group can have this recklessly welcoming love that Jesus displayed. Or maybe you are already in a small group and you guys are really comfortable together. You get along really well. You've been together for a long time and maybe the call of Jesus on your group right now is to open that up and welcome someone else and see how you can share that love with someone who is outside your group.

As I prepped this message, I kept thinking about an oyster because of the way a pearl is formed. Pearls only form when the shell is open and the oyster allows a foreign substance, something that annoys it, to slip in. The mantle covers the irritant with layers of the same substance that is used to create the shell itself. Those layers eventually form a pearl. The pearl is the oyster's natural response to the irritant. If the shell isn't open and doesn't let in something that is initially irritating and difficult, then a pearl will never form. Without that reckless welcoming, the world wouldn't have the beauty that forms as a result.

I think Jesus is calling His followers to form pearls and display something beautiful to the world. Through Christ, let's become a recklessly welcoming community full of recklessly welcoming small groups and love others the way that Jesus loved. Let's pray.

Jesus, I thank You for the way You called Your disciples around You. I thank You for the way You called people who already knew each other, who were friends, who were brothers, but also people who were natural enemies with one another and the way You showed Your love and the power of Your love. I thank You for the way You do amazing things in and through us in communities we never would form by our own choices. I pray that You would do that in our midst, that You would help us be a community that welcomes others, that forms small groups that are welcoming to others, and that we would display this kind of reckless love toward people around us and show Your glory and Your grace in the way that we do that. In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.