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Jesus Sounds Good, But...I've Been Hurt by the Church
Matthew 9:9-13

Well, good morning everyone! My name is Debbie Manning and I'm a pastor here at Christ Presbyterian Church; I work on the Congregational Care team. Happy Mother's Day! I was reflecting on Mother's Day this past week, thinking of some of my own stories, and I was recalling a time when, as a family, we took a trip up to the Boundary Waters. This was just a few years back. Here's a picture [picture shown on the screen]. This is Sam, Kate, and Annie, and as I was looking at that picture, I was reminded that a picture doesn't quite capture it all—sometimes family and life and Mother's Day and the church is a little bit messier than it looks on the surface—because what happened about ten or fifteen minutes after that picture was taken was this. So my husband and I were in another canoe. One was a rental and we returned it, and then everyone but my husband decided we were going to swim back to the cabin where we were staying; it was just around the bend. So, our daughter Annie started swimming way ahead because all she cares about is getting a good workout in, so she's just heading back. Our son Sam is sort of in the middle, looking back and forth between us. I'm in the water and our daughter Kate, who—let's just say is kind of an insecure swimmer—starts to flail around, and then the wind starts to pick up. And my husband who, to really understand the story you have to know about him, is someone who doesn't like a lot of attention; he likes to lay low. So, just as this man on the dock across from him is looking up, the wind whips up and Steve's canoe starts spinning around. Annie is at the dock yelling, "I made it!" Kate is flailing and panicking, and I start to yell, "I think I'm having chest pains. I'm having chest pain!" And Steve is yelling at me but I can't hear because of the wind, and Sam starts swimming back saying, "What's going on?" And it's all windy and all crazy, and in the midst of all the panic, Sam gets a little closer and he goes, "Mom, dad's trying to tell you that if you just put your feet down you can touch where you are." [Congregation laughs] This is a true story, and the beauty of it is my poor husband, who just hates having attention on him, is always my sermon illustration. Sorry honey! But I think it's a little bit like Mother's Day, because we come together on Mother's Day and we celebrate with joy, our moms—or the people who have been like mothers to us. But on the other hand, we hold the sorrow of those who have maybe lost a mom, or have a broken relationship with a mom, or have this deep desire to be a mom

and this is a painful day. But that's the beauty of being part of the church—we get to be in it together. And we get to hold together the joy and the sorrow, and have hope in Jesus. That's what I love about this community.

So we are in this sermon series called “Jesus Sounds Good, but...” and today we are talking about “I've been hurt by the church.” Last week Jake Kirchner talked about “Jesus Sounds Good, but...the Bible is no longer relevant.” Jake said that the Bible is the story of everything. It talks about creation—that we are all created in the image of God. It tells us that there has been a break, a break between us and God, and between one another. And then Jesus comes. God in flesh comes to earth and lives amongst us. And then Jesus leaves, but He leaves us the Holy Spirit, and together we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to show His love to the world. That's what it means to be the church.

So, if we are going to be talking about being hurt by the church, we need to look at what it means to be the church, and maybe what we need to be aware of as well. Because if we are the church, if you and I make up the community of God—a group of people that are committed to following Jesus, displaying His love to the world—than no one should ever be hurt by the church, right? Well, that's not the way it works because people have been hurt by the church—on the inside of the church, on the outside of the church—and it isn't just on a great occasion. Anne Graham Lotz wrote a book called, “Wounded by God's People” and it's an awesome book. In the forward of the book, Priscilla Shirer (who is a speaker and an author who got her Bible Studies degree from Dallas Theological Seminary) said this, and I thought this was fascinating,

“Friendly fire. It's the term used to describe soldiers killed in the line of duty by their fellow fighters. In every war, the percentage of deaths attributed to these phenomena is shocking. Yet it pales in comparison to the number of human hearts that have been disparaged and broken by fellow believers — people who were supposed to be fighting with us, not against us.

And the truth is, we hurt each other inside the church and outside the church. Do you know people who have been hurt by the church? Working in pastoral ministries and just being 57 years old and doing a lot of life and having friends and family, I've heard a lot of stories about people being hurt by the church. One comes to mind in particular...a friend of mine who is now in heaven—she died a few years ago of cancer and her name is Jeannie. She joined this church about six or seven years ago, and she told a story of when she was a young woman. She was a single mom; came to Christ after she had her little baby boy, Matt. And when Matt was three years old—she was a great student

of Scripture, a great follower of Jesus—she joined a community of people and was invited to live in that community and to teach Bible study. And so she moved Matt to this community and a few days later the pastor called her in to his office and he said *I gotta tell you Jeannie, I can't have you teaching other people. I mean, your three-year-old boy is just this huge, blaring light of your sin.* So she wasn't welcome to be there, and that hurt. She was hurt by the church. Fortunately she continued as a faithful follower of Jesus, but she was hurt by the church. So, do you know people who have been wounded? Maybe you've been wounded. And when a person is spiritually wounded, that trauma carries with it the weight of God. The pain can become entangled with our intimate knowledge of who God is, and we the church cannot ignore that.

And maybe we have been the wounders. I think we probably have all been, in some way or another. We exclude and we don't even realize it. We might speak words, or our actions might tell people *you're not welcome here.* But when we do that, we forget the new covenant: to love God and love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Without even knowing it, I think we can put conditions and criteria on those we call our neighbors, on those we are called to love. And I think it's subtle. When I think of all the different people who have come to me over the years, I think of so many of my friends, in this community and outside, that are single or divorced or from blended families and they feel like sometimes they don't belong, And there are those who feel like their voice, their presence, isn't of value, that they are out of place because they are too conservative or they are too liberal. I think of those that don't feel valued because of their gender, or their sexual orientation, or the color of their skin, or their age. There are so many people in this congregation, people that we stand on their shoulders—the foundation of this community—that are elderly now, and that feel like their voice is not of value, that they aren't welcome here. They've been wounded by the church. Excluded, ignored, passed by, criticized, gossip pointed at. Whatever the hurt is, I think it ultimately always comes back to one thing: that for whatever reason, people feel like they don't belong, they're not welcome, they don't fit in, that there is an in and there is an out, and that ultimately there isn't room at the table for them. But here's our good news: Jesus.

Follow along in your pew Bible, or it will be up on the screen. We're in Matthew Chapter 9, verses 9-13:

⁹ 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.

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.”

[Matthew 9:9-13]

It's a good story, isn't it? I think it starts out with a real big bang. I mean here's Matthew, a tax collector who, in ancient times, would have been just hated. Israel was under Roman rule, so he was considered a traitor, and greedy, and he had dealings with Gentiles. So here was somebody who was definitely on the outside, yet Jesus pointed to him and said, “Hey you, come and follow me.” I have to imagine that this guy was like “What? Is he pointing at me?” Yes, Jesus was pointing at him, and Matthew got up and followed Jesus. But I think the real beauty of this story is the table. It's the table, because in ancient culture the table was a place of division and stratification of society. But at Jesus' table, all were welcome. The Pharisees, the religious leaders at the time, were absolutely appalled to see Jesus sitting at this table with these sinners and these outcasts because they regarded anyone who did not keep God's laws—the way that they interpreted it—to be sinners that they would never have spoken to, looked at, talked to, let alone sat at a table and shared a meal with. But that wasn't God's desire. God's desire, His work in the world, is to restore community and fellowship among His people. And Jesus was doing just that through His own ministry of gathering people around the table. And it was a table that was open to everyone. Don't you think that has to be our model for church? I don't think the Pharisees would have seen it that way; they didn't like including everyone. “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But Jesus says *it's not the healthy who need me, who are in need of a physician, but those who are sick*. This is what's important to us. He said *go and learn what this means*. The Pharisees considered themselves healthy before God because they kept all the laws, they observed all the laws, and they were blind to their own spiritual sickness. Jesus' point is that only those who realize they need Jesus come to Him and receive the help that they need. Jesus ends this whole conversation by saying, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” That threatened the very life of the Pharisees. God wasn't looking for sacrifice, which is summarized in these terms by observance of religious rituals. More important to God was mercy—steadfast love. And if the Pharisees would have understood that, they could have been part of loving these sinners.

Now, this isn't a one-off story, right? Because isn't this the Jesus of the Gospels that we know? Meeting people where they are, inviting them in...all sorts of people. And there was never a criteria; there was no standard that anyone had to meet to be welcomed. So I think there are a few things we could consider from this story as we think about what it means to be a church, a church that doesn't hurt people. I think the thing we jump off of is this idea, this reminder that the church is for everyone.

Biblical scholar N.T. Wright, in a wonderful commentary he wrote on the book of Matthew, says this in his introduction: "On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for everyone. It was a great day - sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God's spirit had swept through Jesus' followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God's presence and power." It's the beginning of the church, and the person standing there speaking publically was the apostle Peter. And Peter was sharing what God had done for him, and what He was beginning to do for the entire world: new life, forgiveness, new hope, and power. N.T. Wright goes on to say, "A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world, beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to Him. 'This promise is for you,' he said, 'and for your children, and for everyone who is far away.' It wasn't just for the person standing next to you; it was for everyone." So if we have this understanding that the church is for everyone, how do we move forward and be a church that values all and welcomes all and includes all? And I think the first thing we do is work toward being more aware, because there is damage done when there are unexamined assumptions and words and actions. I think in our story, the Pharisees had blind spots, and that's why Jesus said, "Go and learn what this means." But they didn't. They only saw things from their own inside view. But that is not the way Jesus sees things.

A couple of nights ago my daughter Annie graduated from the Public Health program at the University of Minnesota and they had a keynote speaker there that was one of the best I have ever heard in the many graduations I've been to. Her name was Dr. Camara Jones. Her resume is too long for me to repeat, but she is a family practice physician and an epidemiologist, and she has her doctorate in public health, and her work focuses on the impact of racism on the health and well-being of our nation. And she loves to

give her message to the public in allegories, and one of the stories she told I think fits with what we are talking about today. She tells the story of a young woman, she was in med school, and she was studying late into the night with friends. They decided they were hungry, so they went out to a diner late at night. As they sat around the table the diner closed. And she looked up and she noticed the open sign, because that is what was facing them. In a flash she realized that sometimes when you're on the inside, you only see the open sign. She realized that a few feet away there was a group of people, maybe hungry, and all they could see was the closed sign. And this idea that sometimes when we are on the inside, it's hard to remember to realize that there are actually people on the outside. And I think the message for us is that we want to be a church where our sign says "Open" here *and* "Open" there. I loved that story. When we are in the in sometimes it's hard to see the out.

Now, I do want to say that I think this community is a community of people who strive to be for every one, and I was struck by that. When we think about the awesome capital campaign we had where we were raising money, and we really decided *what is it we are about? What do we believe in?* And I was struck by this; I think it's beautiful; it is from the *Imagine Church* booklet we put together: "Together you and I can live out the kind of church that's not about us, not for us, and not limited by us. Together you and I can be a church where everyone is invited and Jesus is always the hero."

And out of that we came up with one vision statement: **To boldly extend the invitation Jesus makes to us, to everyone.** This gives me great hope, you guys. This is amazing to be a part of a community that strives to be like that.

So do we invite, and do we embrace, and do we make room at our own tables for a neighbor, no matter what our differences are? I love the story of Jesus when He feeds the 5000, and of course, it's an amazing and miraculous story of taking two fish and five loaves of bread and you feed 5000—actually they thought it was 10,000 if you counted the women and children—and that's a cool story on its own. You know what I love about that story? I love that there was no criteria for being on the hillside that day. Jesus didn't say *hey, you better meet these standards*. This wasn't about who knew the religious laws or who was morally superior or who looked a certain way or believed a certain

thing, it was open to everyone, and can you imagine who was on that hillside? Jews and Gentiles and Romans and Pharisees and clean and unclean and lepers and Samaritans and you name it...the outcasts, the sinners. Men, women, children—all were included. When we have that awareness, I think amazing things can happen. I was thinking about how subtle sometimes these things can be, our lack of awareness. I have a friend, Carrie. She's a young, single woman and she was telling me a couple of years ago how much it hurts sometimes to be single here. Sometimes the language, sometimes our programming, sometimes the things we say from up front make her feel like they don't include her. And then she said to me, "You know Debbie, even you talk about you and Steve when you have people over for dinner—and it's always families and it's always couples. You have a lot of single friends like me and I feel like I'm not always included in that." I've changed the way I think now because my friend Carrie shared that with me, increased my level of awareness as I work toward that—and I know I have a lot of work to do. But it's those things that we want to see differently, and hear differently, and live differently. We don't want to exclude anybody, so as the church, let's commit to listening and looking and growing in our awareness. And I think the second thing we can do is acknowledge that people have been hurt, that there are wounds, and those happen from us as individuals, and us as a church...a big church. Because when the church hurts people there is a ripple effect. There's the hurt itself, there's that injury, and we are a caring community and we are committed to that. One of our top values is tangible care, and we value that because tangible care changes lives. But there is hurt itself, and then there's the inability to trust God's people. I mean, we are God's representatives on earth. And gosh, think about the pain that could inflict, and the division. And then ultimately, the biggest risk is that people might not trust God. There's a lot at stake; it's important to acknowledge.

You know, when my daughter Kate was in high school, she sat at lunch with a group of kids—they were the Christian kids in the school, Minnetonka High School—and mid-fall her senior year she came home and said she wasn't going to sit with those kids anymore. I asked her why and she said, "Because there is a part of that group that is really exclusive. Like at lunch they don't include a lot of us in the conversation, and they talk about what they did on Friday night in front of us when we weren't included. They

are in a Bible study and some of us asked if we could join and they said, 'No, there isn't any room.'" And then a few months later, Kate came home and said, "Oh gosh, it must have changed and some of those kids that had hung in there were so hurt because as they shifted lunch times, that group of girls said, 'You know, actually there's no room at our table any more for you.'" And I have to tell you, as a mom, I was so upset; I was so hurt for my daughter, but as a Christ-follower, I was devastated. Because all I could think about is that that's what Minnetonka High School—those kids—see as people who are following Jesus Christ, and the hurt and the pain that that could inflict.

So let's acknowledge it, let's name it, let's claim it, because when we recognize that people have been hurt by the church we can take a stand, and we can make changes. And of course, we aren't going it alone. We can't—we have the Holy Spirit. And let's choose mercy. That's what Jesus said. Let's choose mercy. And it is hard work and it is hard to be honest with ourselves. Maybe we ask the question: what stands in our way? Because what is standing in our way making room at the table or having open-handed kingdom-minded lives? Is it pride, or fear, or uncertainty, or control, or power? Because if any of those things stand in our way, we need to remove them. And I think the question we ask ourselves with every thought and the way we see, and our words and our actions is this: does this lift Jesus higher, or does it lift me higher? Because when we can ask that honest question and answer it honestly, we can take steps forward and really be the church. And then we can ask each other for forgiveness, and we can accept forgiveness, and we can stand in that truth, and we know it from God that the truth will set us free. And when we're free, we're free to love like Jesus. And what God said was that our love would be the trademark of us being the church. John 13:35 says, "By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another."

The founder of the home church movement in England, a man named Cannon Earnest Southfield, defined the church like this: "The holiest moment of the church service is the moment when God's people, strengthened by preaching and sacrament, go out of the church door into the world to be the church."

We don't go to church; we *are* the church. We're God's people. We're God's people who are in Christ Jesus and we get to be the church. And the great commission is to go

out into the world and make disciples. We make disciples when we show God's love to unbelievers and believers alike. And we can't do that if we are hurting people along the way.

I want to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry for the ways that I know I have hurt people along the way; I'm sorry for the ways the church has hurt people along the way. But I'm also hopeful. I'm hopeful because we have a Jesus that shows us what it means to be the church.

I'm going to end with something very simple. A couple weeks ago I was on a walk with my daughter Kate and I said, "Kate, why do you think people are hurt by the church?" And in a very simple but profound answer she said, "I don't know mom. I think people forget who Jesus is, and then they don't follow Him."

We have a God who tells us and shows us what it means. Let's be those kinds of people. Please pray with me:

Holy and gracious God, You show us what it means to be the church, and how to love one another and welcome all people in. We trust God that you're the one that will be doing the transforming work in our hearts and in our minds, and we thank you for the privilege of being invited along for the ride. Help us to be people who keep our eyes focused firmly on you Jesus. We pray all this in Your holy name. 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.