

Church Like You Never Expected – “Thii”

Reconnect – May 17, 2009

Series/Morning Intro

- Video games have been around since the 1970’s – and for the most part, they’ve been more of the same thing – fingers and thumbs
- But a couple of years ago, Nintendo came out with a new kind of video game system, with a really weird name: “The Wii”
- And the idea of Wii, as you probably know, is that it is interactive and involved – you stand up, you move, you wiggle, you wave – and you many times control a little character that looks just like YOU – a “Mii”
- The Wii has turned video games on its head – it outsells the PS3 and the Xbox combined in Canada, because it appeals to all kinds of people, from video gamers to seniors in nursing homes
- Why the appeal? It engages – it’s not just about sitting and watching, but you become a character in something bigger than yourself, and that means you have to get out of your seat and get to work
- And what if church – both the place and the group of people – could be less a traditional video game and more the Wii...?
- Welcome to “Church Like You Never Expected” – and we start this morning with “Thii” **[“thee”]**

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That night Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to be his dinner guests, along with his fellow tax collectors and many other notorious sinners. The Pharisees were indignant. “Why does your teacher eat with such scum?” they asked his disciples.

When he heard this, Jesus replied, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor – sick people do.” Then he added, “Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: ‘I want you to be merciful; I don’t want your sacrifices.’ For I have come to call sinners, not those who think they are already good enough.”

Matthew 9:9-13

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Text: Matthew 9:9-13; I Timothy 1:15-16

Key Thought: Faith begins with an invitation to find the place we belong: with Jesus and His people.

As Jesus was going down the road, he saw Matthew sitting at his tax-collection booth. “Come, be my disciple,” Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him. That night Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to be his dinner guests, along with his fellow tax collectors and many other notorious sinners. The Pharisees were indignant. “Why does your teacher eat with such scum?” they asked his disciples. When he heard this, Jesus replied, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor – sick people do.” Then he added, “Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: ‘I want you to be merciful; I don’t want your sacrifices.’ For I have come to call sinners, not those who think they are already good enough.” (Matthew 9:9-13, NLT)

Intro: “One of these things is not like the other...”

- Ever feel like the third cookie? Like you’re the one that “doesn’t belong”?
- As we said at the beginning of the service, we’re going Wii-style – interactive and engaging
- So, **let’s get interactive:** take a moment and think about a time in your life when you felt like you just didn’t belong – it may have been a summer camp, a class at school, or going through a difficult time
 - Q: What was the situation? (**switch around between people**)
 - Q: Why didn’t you feel like you belonged?
 - Q: Did your feelings eventually change? Or did your circumstances? Or did you leave it behind, instead?
- Not belonging is probably one of the worst feelings that we can have – where people don’t know us, or they don’t care, or we feel alone or unwanted or without purpose
- And the funny thing is, sometimes we can be in the middle of everything and everyone we know, and still feel like we don’t belong – like something has changed – like WE’VE changed – and now, things aren’t quite right

Matthew: looking to belong

- The story that was already read this morning is about a man named Matthew and his struggle to belong, and what he found – that’s what we’re going to look at a little more in depth

As Jesus was going down the road, he saw Matthew sitting at his tax-collection booth.

“Come, be my disciple,” Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him.

- Matthew appears as just a side character in a larger story about Jesus – and yet, there’s something about him that catches Jesus’ eye
- Frankly, there shouldn’t be – he’s someone that everyone else in his town would rather not see
- We live in a town where lots of people work for the government – and despite our joking around sometimes, we know they do important work, (at least a little) no matter which branch they work for
- But Matthew was a contractor, working for a despised group of overlords, an occupying army

- He was paid a cut of what he was able to collect – and that meant that the more he collected, the better for him – there were no agreed upon rates, no standard – just what was possible, town to town
- He was someone that didn't belong, because he had chosen not to – selling his birthright, selling his culture, even his people, for money
- The only place he belonged was where he was when Jesus saw him – the tax collection booth, counting the day's take
- And yet, something about him catches Jesus' eye – Jesus, who seems at home either alone or in the middle of a crowd, who always has people who want to be near him, and yet doesn't yield to the temptation to change to fit in
- Jesus has already started to choose his close followers – the people that he's going to entrust his teaching to, the people that are going to be his legacy – up to this point it's been his extended relatives, his kinfolk
- So no-one could predict what happens next – Jesus speaks to him and more, gives him the golden ticket – he asks him to be a part this team he's building – him, a tax collector! The worst of the bunch!
- Not even Jesus' own disciples can believe it – doesn't he know who this person is? Doesn't he know that they wouldn't BELONG in this group?
- But even in their shock, they have some relief – after all, even though Jesus has asked, it's not like Matthew is going to say yes – of course not – why would he even want to, given his profession and his lifestyle?
- Umm, yeah – he takes the job, and leaves the only belonging he has, behind
- **Let's get interactive:** why does Matthew want to belong?
 - Why does anyone want to belong, to fit in?
 - Why have you, in the past?
- Matthew somehow sees a chance to change everything – and he's miserable enough to take it
- Does he know who Jesus is? He's no doubt heard the gossip, the talk around town – but he decides to risk it anyway – with just a look, just a sentence, he jumps

That night Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to be his dinner guests, along with his fellow tax collectors and many other notorious sinners. The Pharisees were indignant. "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?" they asked his disciples.

- It's hard to believe that so much can change in a day – but Matthew must be one of those people who gets into things with both feet – he's decided to be a follower of Jesus, and it's such a difference in his life, in his outlook, in the way he feels that he wants to let everyone know it
- This is a celebration of a major milestone in his life, and he throws out the invitation to all his contacts
- He puts out the big spread and they come, half for the party and half to see if the rumours they've been hearing about are true
- For those of us that have heard this story enough times, we seem to gloss over this part a little bit – and yet, it was a huge sticky point for a respected group in the town: Jesus and his followers seem to

have no qualms about joining this party, even though the people there are the equivalent of the criminal underworld for that time – or at least, they’re viewed like it

- If you or I got an invitation like that today, we might wonder if we “belonged” there – if that was a place we should be
 - After all, what would people think? We’re respectable – we’ve built a reputation that hopefully we want to keep
 - And maybe we’re “good, church-going people”
- That’s the very objection this group of people called the “Pharisees” had to parties like this – throwing together people like this and adding in too much food and booze, and well, nothing good was ever going to happen there, and it wasn’t a place that respectable people BELONGED
- **Let’s get interactive:** who were the Pharisees? Don’t worry if you don’t know – but some people here might know
 - Why would they have been objecting?
 - And on the other hand – why were they around to see who was going in, anyway?
- Jesus doesn’t seem to have the same reservations that we might – he’s right in the thick of it – in other places in his biography, people accuse him of being a drunk and a glutton, someone who parties too hard and too often – he seems to be able to look past the reputations of the people there and what they do for a living to see them as people, to interact with, to get to know, to be with

When he heard this, Jesus replied, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor – sick people do.” Then he added, “Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: ‘I want you to be merciful; I don’t want your sacrifices.’ For I have come to call sinners, not those who think they are already good enough.”

- Jesus isn’t embarrassed by the criticism – he gives it right back to the Pharisees with some common sense that’s hard to argue with – “Healthy people don’t need a doctor – sick people do”
- He’s talking about their insides – their hearts, their spirits, their feelings – their head space – they’ve been shunned, they’ve been gossiped about, they’ve been ignored by the “good people” – and the hurts are piling up, but no-one’s taken the time to notice
- And in fact, the good people and their objections have kept these people from reaching out to anyone who might in some way be able to help – because they have spiritual needs too – emotional needs – the need to be a part of something, to “belong”
- Yes, the tax collectors and the “sinners” have problems – Jesus isn’t denying that – but so do the people who figure they’re OK
- So Jesus re-interprets their religion for them, using their Bible: instead of worrying so much about ritual obligations for God, try loving someone and showing them kindness instead
- Again, reading this today, it seems pretty obvious – but the lines get blurry quickly, even today
- **Let’s get interactive:** in what “issues” is the church today unsure of how to do what Jesus is saying?
 - Why does it get blurry?
 - What “sorts” of people today don’t generally feel at home in a church?

The Other Side: Feeling At Home

- The Pharisees don't feel like they belong, nor do they want to
- And yet Matthew seems to have all kinds of security – not only is he really happy to “belong” with Jesus, but he also has this idea – very quickly on – that Jesus belongs with HIM, too – and he invites Jesus into his world, into where HE “belongs”
- **Let's get interactive** (take a moment and think about it)
 - Where do YOU belong?
 - What about it makes you feel like you belong?
 - What benefits does belonging bring you?
- I think about my kids, and I think about the house where I grew up – lots of memories there, good and bad, but I sure felt that I belonged – my mom sold it a few years ago, and it was a shock to my system even then, at 30 years old!
- When I think back in my mind, I can imagine every nook and cranny – every stair, every spot – I belonged there, it was my home
- I think Matthew has that same sort of feeling around Jesus – that he's “home” – that he's secure, that he's looked after, that everything is going to be OK
- And Jesus makes it clear here to us, as his followers, as people who want to be closer to God, who want more of God in our lives or who are interested in what that might mean – he makes it clear that we are to show that same kind of acceptance, to make a place where others belong, too

The Knock On Church Today

- The knock on some churches today is that sure, the people who are the regulars feel that they belong – but there doesn't seem to be much interest in extended that circle of belonging to the people who wouldn't normally be found in a church building
- We wanted to be sensitive to that, when we were thinking about starting Reconnect and dreaming about what it could look like
- One of the questions we asked ourselves was, “How can people go from having no place for church in their life, but an interest in God, to knowing Him and experiencing the incredible life that He brings?”
- And during this time, when I was working through my own “belonging” issues, coming out of a church background, I was reading a bunch of different books in Steve and Sandy's basement, and I came across an idea of a guy named Brian McLaren, who is a fairly controversial writer and a minister, but coming out of a non-Bible College background – a very different perspective than what I'd had before
- I didn't like everything I read, but I liked this: the idea was that people didn't have to BELIEVE, before they could feel that they BELONGED
- Traditionally in church, we had done a good job of welcoming people into the fold – once they prayed a certain prayer, or began to live a certain lifestyle, or began to change – but we didn't feel any obligation to people who weren't yet at that point, to try to make room for them – except in a pew
- How could they be a part of us, if they didn't have these beliefs in common with us?
- And what we missed in that picture, was that we have so much in common as people anyway

- We all love our kids, we all wonder about the future, we all do our best to get by and help each other, we all want, generally, to do the right thing, more or less
- And it took meeting people during that time that WEREN'T like me – that didn't have church in common with me – for me to see that – I was the bubble boy, but I got out of the bubble
- That was revolutionary for me – and out of that came what inspired what we call our path to growing in our faith – Belong, Believe, Become – Belonging – finding your place among other people on the same journey – Believing – learning, asking, doubting, questioning, forming – and Becoming – seeing the change that comes with moving Jesus more into the centre of our lives

God's Always Been Green:

- This is also where the recycling idea comes from – because “reduce, reuse, recycle” is a process that continues, just like Belong, Believe and Become – recycling is not a one time thing, and then you're done – it's a lifestyle, that continues and deepens, and it's the same with us
- Once you go around the triangle once, you have an opportunity to do it again – and the idea is like a drill, going deeper – the rotation is a spiral, digging deeper, finding new surface, getting tighter and closer to what's true and good
- When it comes to Belong, it can look like...
 - Making yourself at home in a Living Room
 - Making Sunday mornings at St. Emily's part of your week
 - Getting involved at Reconnect in an area that interests you (it's a great way to get to know people)
 - Take someone you see out for a coffee
 - Build a friendship with someone else at Reconnect and let them in your life, even just a little bit to start

Belonging:

- What makes “belonging” true and good is that we see it in the life of Jesus – Jesus is the one that reaches out and makes a place for people to belong – He's the “Thii” – it starts with Him, with the love of God reaching out
- So many times, people – you – me – think that we have to please God in order to get his attention - that we have to climb the mountain before we can ever think that God will respond
- But the message of the Bible is that God always leads the way – He knows we mess up and He loves us anyway – He doesn't wait for us to get our acts together, but instead He acts on our behalf
- And Jesus is always on the lookout for one more person to include

Key Thought:

Faith begins with an invitation to find the place we belong: with Jesus and His people.

“This is a true saying, and everyone should believe it: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – and I was the worst of them all. But that is why God had mercy on me, so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners.

Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life.”

(I Timothy 1:15-16, NLT)

Conclusion: “You Invite Me In” – Meredith Andrews

- I wanted to end off this morning with a song
- I heard it on the radio a few months ago, and it struck me immediately – but listen for yourself
- *[play the song]*
- Do you know this morning, that you belong?
- Do you feel it as strongly as Matthew did?
- Has it started to impact your life? And are you taking steps to increase that level of belonging?
- Have you taken the invitation?

Response: Prayer