

God's Original Purpose
Matthew 9:9-13; 18-26
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade is a modern day version of the quest for the Holy Grail. In medieval literature the Holy Grail, the cup Jesus used at the Last Supper, was the ultimate holy relic knights of olde risked their lives searching for, because of its supernatural healing powers.

In the climatic scene, Indiana Jones and the villain find themselves in the long lost cave where Christ's cup was hidden in plain sight because you see, the place was filled with scores of ornate, jewel encrusted chalices. The guardian of the Holy Grail instructed the villain, because he has the gun, to choose first. Unfortunately for him, he chose the most extravagant cup, drank from it and died a horrible death. Next Indiana Jones chose the only plain cup in sight. He chose wisely.

That plain, utilitarian cup is the perfect icon for Jesus of Nazareth's life and ministry. Only centuries later, after the Church became wealthy and powerful, were gold and silver chalices used to celebrate the Lord's Supper, leaving me to believe Jesus and the apostles would have been perplexed by the high pomp and circumstance of Medieval Cathedral worship.

The Bible tells us one of the traps God's people have historically fallen into, is to forget the Church's humble origins and God's original intentions. Abraham was first called to be the patriarch of a people, chosen not for privilege, but responsibility: God called Israel to be a servant people, a shining city on a hill, proclaiming the love and grace of God to the world. Then, in the New Testament, Jesus invited men and women to discipleship saying, "...deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow me." He also taught a disciple's true greatness is only manifested in the simple trust of a child plus the extravagant desire to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and welcome the stranger.

What's more, Jesus never said his Church should be all about self-preservation, spending all available resources on maintaining the institution and protecting its privileged status. Jesus' teaching "...those who try to save their lives will lose them, but those willing to give up their lives will save them," instructs not only individuals but the entire institution. In other words, we should be all about the business of extending our fair share of time, treasure and talents to bring Christ to people. However, both the Bible and Church history show this essential mandate of Christ's Gospel usually got lost in the mix.

In today's lesson Jesus tried to refocus the Pharisees back to God's original Master Plan, to seek out and befriend the lost.

But the Pharisees, scandalized Jesus was sharing a meal with tax collectors, challenged the disciples, "Why does your Jesus eat with sinners?" They believed rubbing shoulders with sinners would bring instant contamination; they reasoned when you lie down with dogs, you catch their fleas. They wouldn't consider the possibility that instead of the believer being contaminated, the non believer just might be blessed. Their sense of superiority proved they were really only concerned about themselves, while Jesus was especially concerned about others.

The Pharisees addressed their question to the disciples, probably because they were still smarting from their last Q and A session with Jesus. Even so Jesus answered, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." Then, to prove his point he quoted from their own Scriptures. "What I want is mercy, not sacrifice...I did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners."

Using the Prophet Hosea, Jesus reasserted one of the Scriptures central themes. Making ritual sacrifices and being religiously correct doesn't go far enough. God doesn't want orthodox respectability, God wants justice and mercy. God doesn't want us to isolate ourselves from the problematic people of the world; God wants us to go out there and extend the hand of friendship to those who need it most.

Abraham Lincoln believed the best way to destroy his enemies was to make them his friends. He took his lead from Jesus who turned God's enemies into God's friends, by making them his friends by inviting tax collectors to dinner.

Naturally, the Pharisees were incensed because, culturally, when friends invited friends to dinner it was a sign of social and spiritual equality. Breaking bread together was also an opportunity to celebrate intimacy and shared values. Hospitality was Jesus' way of saying to the tax collectors, "Welcome into my life!"

Question. If Jesus returned to earth in the flesh today, where would he spend the bulk of his time, in established congregations like ours or would he be out and about looking for lost souls?

If the gospels are any indication, Jesus would spend most of his time out there in the trenches. Still, I like to think Jesus would also enjoy the opportunity to drop in and visit us here at Babcock. He'd come and listen to our stories, get to know us and let us know how special we are. But then, suddenly, he'd look at each one of us and ask, "Tell me, how are you making the difference in the lives of the lost, confused people right here in your own neighborhood?" Before we could answer he'd quickly say, "Follow me," and proceed to take us on a tour of nearby broken homes, homeless shelters, and street corners. Like the twelve original disciples we'd find ourselves watching Jesus making new friends, connecting them to himself and giving them a growing awareness of God's deep and abiding love. Then, after a while he'd remember we were still there all this time, watching the Kingdom of God coming near and suddenly he'd say, "I'm so glad you're here with me today seeing how these supposedly problematic people respond to my love. Tell you what, now it's your turn. I hereby officially empower you to go and do likewise. And don't worry 'You of Little Faith,' I'll be with you always."

Jesus wants his Church to be the beloved community committed to spreading the gospel of redemptive love, justice and mercy. So how do we begin?

Maybe by first admitting we too need to be loved and healed by Jesus so his compassion and zeal can become ours. Next, we need to be liberated from any vestiges latter day Phariseeism, the need to separate and isolate ourselves from problematic people. Finally we need to remember we were saved and chosen to serve "the least of these" because in God's eyes they are most important.

The Holy Grail, the cup Jesus used at the Last Supper, was not sterling silver or solid gold, just plain every day pottery. Jesus wasn't all about extravagance, unless we mean extravagantly befriending and helping people we might totally overlook. But we have a calling, to live the Gospel by loving God and befriending the problematic, lost, confused people right here in our own neighborhood.

Lord Jesus, show us the way and give us the grace, courage and strength, to go and do likewise. Amen.