

**June 8, 2008**  
**Genesis 12:1-9, Matthew 9:9-13**  
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**“The Shattering of Religion and the Beginning of Faith”**

My grandparents were members of an historic downtown church in the city in which I grew up. When I was a teenager, I remember reading in the newspaper about how the pastor of that large congregation resigned his call in order to work with the government's efforts to end poverty and hunger in South Carolina. In the sixties, illness and malnutrition were very real in South Carolina. People across the city and the state were horrified to read about this minister travelling with political leaders to expose the poverty that existed in rural counties and city slums. I remember seeing a picture of him standing with a family in front of their tumbledown shack. Nobody wanted the terrible secret to be made known. I remember overhearing adult conversations about how unseemly it was for a minister of the gospel to give up his calling to preach in order to get involved in such worldly matters. It seemed to me that a whole lot of people wanted a religion that could be manipulated to maintain the status quo rather than a faith that could change the world.

The Pharisees have to blink twice to be certain they are seeing what they think they see. Jesus is eating dinner with a bunch of known sinners and tax collectors. It is not the sort of thing a rabbi who is gaining a reputation as a teacher and healer should do. By entering the house of a tax collector and consorting with sinners, Jesus has left the familiar world in which things are marked as right and wrong, clean and unclean, acceptable and unacceptable. He has crossed the invisible but clear boundary set by the law and the traditions of the people.

Whatever good things he may say or good deeds he may do are now discredited. What respectable person will listen to his teaching anymore? I suspect they find it hard to hide their delight at his downfall. By eating with sinners he has gone off the deep end into a sea of trouble. They ask, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” It is more a statement than a question. The question marks the boundary of their religion more clearly than any fence could do. It is a question for which they really don't expect an answer.

Jesus knows exactly what is at stake. He knows that his actions pose the very real question, “What is the true nature of religion?” To make the point he quotes a familiar line from the prophet Hosea, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” At the time of Hosea, the people believe that by saying their prayers and making their sacrifices they will get what they want from God. I call it “vending machine” theology. You do the right things, press the right buttons and you get the goodies from God. Hosea tells us that God is not impressed with such a religion. God says that their love is like the morning mist and the early dew that disappear with the heat of the sun. God desires “steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” In many ways, human religion can degenerate into a self-deceived effort to control and domesticate God. In one sense, religion is about all the rules we set up, the customs we establish, the traditions we make and the values we hold dear. It is easy to confuse the trappings of religion with the heart of the faith. In Jesus, we see the shattering of religion and the beginning of faith.

True faith springs from the call of God to establish a new community. In Genesis, God calls Abraham and Sarah to leave everything that is familiar and to go to a new land that God will show them. Neither Abraham nor Sarah says a word. They pack up their things, gather a few family pictures, say goodbye to their neighbors, load the car and leave for Destination Unknown. The story of the call of Abraham and Sarah is told in such a way as to make sure that we know it is all God's idea. God seeks them out—not the other way around. When they leave home, they don't draw up an agreement about who will drive, who would fix the sandwiches and who will look out for a good motel. They don't even have a road map or a GPS device. They trust that God will provide what they need and tell them what they need to know. They simply hear the call of God and obey. They live by faith.

From that moment on, the Bible continues to tell stories about how God seeks out, claims, inspires, moves, shakes up, challenges and calls an astonishing array of saints and sinners: a sly trickster who limps named Jacob, a spoiled son with a fabulous coat named Joseph, a faithful Moabite woman named Ruth, a courageous prostitute named Rahab, a tough-as-nails judge named Deborah, a troubled king named Saul, a wild-eyed prophet named Elijah, a shy girl named Mary, a proud Pharisee named Paul and even a hated tax-collector named Matthew. Through all these people and many more, the Word of God constantly tears down the false ideas we have about God, the idolatries we so love and the trivial religious practices we want to enshrine as holy truth. Just when we start to admire our own religiosity, we meet the humble obedient faith of an Abraham or Sarah. Just when we think that God chooses us because we're the best, we find Jesus in Matthew's house shaking up our notions of who is in and who is out.

Jesus says that he has come to call not the righteous but sinners. The call of Matthew proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus means exactly what he says. As a tax collector, Matthew is a collaborator with the Romans. He collects the hated tax and makes his living by collecting and keeping for himself more than is due. Jesus feasts with Matthew's friends in Matthew's home. The call to follow Jesus goes out not only to respectable fishermen like James and John, but also to people in desperate situations who are scorned by others, powerless before the powers that be, troubled and hopeless. St. Augustine said that the church is not a hotel for saints but a hospital for sinners.

My point is this: Like Abraham, Sarah, Matthew and countless others, we are called by God's goodness and grace to become a new community of faith that is unlike any other community we know. Unlike any other community, the church is totally the work of God. God calls the church into being and shatters our narrow ideas of what we think the church ought to be and do. As those called by God to be the body of Christ together, we tune our ears to listen to God's word; we open our eyes to see God's way; we unbind our hearts to love others as God loves them. The community of faith is called into being by the gospel so that it may live in the power of the gospel. If we refuse to let the truth of Christ challenge our worn out ideas, transform our selfish ways of living, reshape our broken values, change the way we spend our money, guide our relationships, then we are just playing games with God and poking around the remains of some old dead religion.

To follow Jesus is to enter a community of faith built on boundless mercy and forgiving love. It is to see the world through the eyes of Christ. It is to live in the word spreading the gospel of justice and peace. I do not know in what particular way Christ may be calling you, but I know that when you answer the call your life will change. As we follow him, Jesus will shatter our worn out notions of religion and create in us a new faith.

I have told some of you about a man I know who decided his special calling is to take the time to listen to the people he meets throughout the day. He wasn't always like that. For a long time, he thought that working in his business, increasing his wealth, getting things done and going from point A to point B were the essential things. Oh, he was polite enough to others. He went to church, but for many years I think he missed the point. He primarily related to the people he met in terms of their function—the air conditioner repairman, the teller at the bank, the man who dried his car at the car wash and the employees at his business. When he began to follow Jesus, the world in which he lived suddenly looked different. He realized that there is a party going on and he has been standing outside not even hearing the laughter and the music. Jesus called him to come into the feast. All these people in his life, from the server at the fast food counter to the business associate he meets for lunch and from the administrator at the office to his son at home, are the ones Jesus also calls and invites to the feast. He decided that if Jesus is inviting them to dinner, then maybe it is time he got to know them too. He said that a little thing has made all the difference. Now he looks people in the eye, studies their faces, listens to their stories and speaks to them as real people beloved and treasured by God. They are they a part of Christ's body too. They are guests at the feast of God.

I see the difference in my friend. He is less demanding and more accepting; he is less impatient and more peaceful; he is less afraid and more loving. His old worn out ideas that he used to wrap so carefully in a thin covering of religion are gone. Something has shattered and something else has come to life. Everywhere he goes there seems to be something special in the air, like a party is just about to begin.