

Mark 1:1-2:28 "A Welcoming Community"

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[0 : 01] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us. Rejoice in that because it's a picture of what we want to be true.

We know there are many even in this city who know the coldness, the isolation of hell and who have never tasted the warm welcome of heaven.

And we want that to be true not just in a room like this but through a people like us. And so we need you to change us, to mold us and shape us.

And so we're eager that we come to your word because it does that and your spirit does that. And so, Father, do it this morning because you delight to make us more like you.

We ask in Jesus' name, amen. Today is our last sermon in this series before we jump back to the Gospel of Luke and follow Jesus to the cross.

[1 : 13] And we've been talking about biblical community, about being the church that God has called us to be, the type of community God would use to bring renewal and revival in us and through us.

And we've done this through the lens of Southwood's core commitments. So we've said God calls us to be a church focused on Jesus, His cross, His word, His body.

And when we are, He promises to take us on mission, that we go somewhere to build His kingdom, to storm the gates of hell through us.

And so we're utterly dependent on Him for this. We need each other in meaningful, deep relationships to be a family on a mission together, valuing people for who they are, confessing and forgiving sins, carrying each other's burdens.

And now, today, as we talk about our commitment to love the least, the lost, the littlest, the lonely, and the left out, the bottom line is that any biblical community, a church that is prayerfully dependent on God for its Christ-centered mission, with arms locked in meaningful relationships, must welcome those who often feel unwelcome.

[2 : 49] See, we talked last time about truly valuing people. And that's not always so hard, is it? I mean, we kind of like people as long as we get to set the list, as long as we get to pick those who are easy and comfortable and just like me in every way.

And those relationships develop naturally. We've seen over and over again in Luke that Jesus' community operates supernaturally.

He welcomes outsiders in, befriends enemies, demonstrates God's heart for the poor and the marginalized over and over. I want us to see a beautiful and challenging picture of that, the beginning of the Gospel of Mark this morning.

You may benefit from turning there. It's on page 836 of the Bible in the pew. In Mark 1, at verse 16, Jesus begins His earthly ministry, calling people to follow Him.

Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.

- [4 : 12] Now, we often think of this idea of fishers of men as evangelistic. And it's not less than that, but it's much more than that, actually.
- Notice Jesus is calling men who are already fishermen. That's what it says, right? And He says He will make them become something.
- He will change them into fishermen. The same word is used. But the difference is fishermen of men.
- As they follow Jesus, He will reshape them so that their lives are reoriented toward people. It's not merely that they'll hold weekly evangelistic crusades and revival meetings, but rather that everything about them focuses on people.
- It would be like Jesus saying to some of you, follow Me and I will make you become engineers of people. Homemakers of people. Lawyers of people.
- [5 : 24] Contractors of people. Where everything about you is shaped toward that. And again, maybe not so bad, right? I can value people sometimes. Sometimes they're really useful to me.
- But watch as you see what kind of people Jesus is going to have you run into if you follow Him. Some of you will recognize the chart-topping hit of the 70s and 80s that begins by saying, who are the people in your neighborhood?
- In your neighborhood. Some of you recognize that. Some of you are very confused at why that was so popular. This is the tune I want in your head today as we talk about this.
- I want you to think as we talk, who are the people that you meet when you're walking down the street? The people that you meet each day? And who are those who should be perhaps more often in your path?
- I want names to come to mind for you. Not just Mr. McFeely. Names and faces that you know.
- [6 : 37] As we follow Jesus, I want the least, the lost, the littlest, the lonely, the left out to have names and faces in your life. These are the people He's calling us to orient our lives toward.
- We are to extend the welcome of the gospel to everyone in our path. And that's going to get uncomfortable fast because we're following Jesus, right? Watch what happens.
- Jesus invites fishermen, blue-collar, hard-working, smelly, blister-handed fishermen into relationship with Him. And they start walking through the neighborhood.
- As Jesus calls us to follow Him, He first takes us, verse 21, to church on the Lord's day. Ah, yes. Exactly what I expected.
- This is going to be great. Right where we should be. Except, verse 23, there are strange people at church.
- [7 : 38] Church, spiritually, mentally troubled, crying out with a loud voice. We don't do that at church, right? Don't do that here.
- But Jesus is not bothered. Jesus cares for them. There are strange people at church. You knew that, right?
- Sometimes, not making so much noise as the man in this story, but crying out in the pain of mental illness, in the torment of spiritual struggle and doubt that's often very awkward or uncomfortable to express at church.
- And you have to be listening to welcome them. So, church is over and they go home. Seems safe enough.
- Except Jesus takes Peter to His mother-in-law, doesn't He? Let's go home, Peter. Here's your mother-in-law. She's been sick and Jesus cares for her.

[8 : 47] Now, maybe Peter loved his mother-in-law. I do. She might listen to the recording, so that's very important to state up front. But can we just stop and admit that sometimes it's those who are closest to us that it's easiest to push away?

Sometimes holiday gatherings and vacations where I just want to think about myself become occasions for treating the frustrating mother-in-law or the awkward family member with scorn and contempt rather than the gracious welcome of Jesus.

But then, before the day is over, in the same day, Jesus has walked from strange church people to sick mothers-in-law to now crowds of people bringing all the sick and possessed from miles around.

They're all coming. It's like Jesus has just walked you into a hospital. Picture this scene. You just started following this guy around and all of a sudden, it's not really just a hospital.

It's like a psych ward. It's utter chaos. Right? People who you don't have any idea what to do with. Illnesses of all sorts. Issues no one has been able to solve for years.

[10 : 06] All of a sudden, they're bringing them to Jesus. You've got to figure that many of these people lived on the fringes of their families, of their neighborhoods. Nobody knew how to handle them, how to talk to them.

And all we wanted to do was follow Jesus. I mean, to be Christ-centered, it sounded like a good place to start as a church. We'll be Christ-centered. We'll go where Jesus goes. And now all these people are showing up.

What in the world? That's not what I'm following him for. Chapter 1 closes with the account of a leper coming to Jesus and asking to be cleansed.

By all accounts, verse 41 should read, Moved with fear and wanting to make sure he wasn't infected. Jesus kept his distance. Or moved with disgust and wanting to maintain his newfound social popularity.

Jesus refused to associate with the outcast. Instead, we read of a welcome. Verse 41, Moved with pity.

[11 : 12] He stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, I will be clean. Who knows how long it had been since this leper felt human touch.

But newly famous, very busy Jesus has time for the single, lonely leper.

Healing his sickness and his shame with a word and a touch. In a time this was thought dangerous and foolish, Mother Teresa became known for touching lepers.

For embracing dying AIDS patients to bring them comfort. So much so that Christianity today said that when she died, she stirred a generation by touching the untouchables.

She got the idea from Jesus, I think, whose welcoming touch turned the world upside down.

[12 : 29] Jesus is making fishermen of men, isn't he? He's showing his new followers the kinds of people he welcomes and the counter-cultural ways that he welcomes them.

Can we admit that following Jesus is getting a little less comfortable? It's a little bit maybe not like what I had imagined. Chapter 2 begins with the famous account of the guy who is literally left out.

So much so that his friends have to climb the roof and dig a hole just to lower him down to Jesus, who gives him his undivided attention, forgives his sins, and heals his paralysis.

Wonderful. Wonderful. But then Jesus crosses the line again. Verse 14, here comes Jesus with his fishermen walking behind him and he sees a local tax collector and he says, hey Matthew, follow me.

What? This is the guy who robs you. The traitor who keeps your business from being profitable no matter how hard you work.

[13 : 42] And guess what? Jesus not only cares about him too, but is also asking you to share life with him. Y'all will be walking around together following Jesus, won't you, for the next three years.

Could it get any harder? Well, yes. You could then walk to Matthew's house and be surrounded by all the traitors and crooked businessmen you could squeeze into one house for a party.

In a town where everybody knows everybody and you get your reputation based upon your associations, Jesus is associating with the ones known to be the lowest of the low.

They steal your money, your husband, your moral reputation. You've got to believe this made Peter a bit uncomfortable. It certainly made the local religious leaders uncomfortable.

Verse 15, As Jesus reclined at table in Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.

[14 : 55] And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, why does he eat with sinners and tax collectors?

And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

Jesus says, this is not just for one day. This is not going to stop. This is the very reason I came. He's always doing this. It's normal for him.

Many of them follow him. He welcomes the outsiders, the flagrant, well-known sinners, into his community. And who has a problem with it?

The church people. Y'all, can we admit for just a second that there's a tendency in each one of us to want to push back against Jesus when he starts to take us places that are out of our comfort zones in these kind of ways?

[16 : 08] That this isn't exactly as warm and fuzzy as I thought it might be to follow Jesus. We're the ones who think we need to keep ourselves and our kids away from such people.

We honestly think Jesus has gone too far sometimes. And we think he needs us to protect his reputation. I'm a people person by nature.

I love meeting new people. But when I was at a wedding reception recently with many people very different from me, the thought in my head was, I hope I get to sit by someone comfortable. Our hearts naturally want the easy, comfortable relationships, don't they?

Not actively pushing others out, perhaps, but not actively welcoming them in either. A couple years ago, I sat down for lunch with several members of Southwood who are ethnic minorities here.

And I asked them why it was, how it was that Southwood felt like home to them when most of the people around them looked very different from them.

[17 : 25] For everyone, it was a connection or relationship outside these walls where they already felt loved and safe that made them feel that they could be welcome here too.

Y'all, if we sit idly by in our comfortable relationships, the least lost, littlest, lonely, and left out in this city will not naturally see this community as safe and welcoming and home.

I'm just trying to be honest with us. The poor, the marginalized, orphans and widows often feel unwelcome in society and must know God's welcome from us.

And then there's the lost, right? Unbelievers, tax collectors and sinners. They often feel very connected, welcome in society, but the place they feel unwelcome is where?

Right here. Right here. With God, they think they may not be welcome. It's not to be that way in Jesus' community.

[18 : 44] See, when we truly follow Jesus, He doesn't take us into a connect community of people who look, talk, and think just like us all the time so we can huddle up in easy, comfortable relationships.

No. No. He wants these new communities and in fact, this entire church to be a place where the disconnected find connection, where the hurting find refuge, where the broken find healing.

I won't say everything that looks like, but y'all should talk about it in your new communities this morning. Bonhoeffer says, the exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people from a Christian community may actually mean the exclusion of Christ.

In the poor brother, Christ is knocking at the door. See, we must be personally and corporately a safe place to struggle.

Struggling sinners always hung around Jesus, felt safe with Him. The church then should be a welcoming place, a safe place for them. Not because God quit being holy and hating sin, but because Jesus eats with sinners.

[20 : 00] That's what makes it okay that we are not okay. That Jesus is perfect and Jesus is rescuing and renovating us. That's why Southwood wants to be and longs to be a hospital for sinners.

Not so we can all bemoan our failings together, but because the centerpiece of our community is the great physician who heals. So imagine Jesus coming to town and who would be the most eager to be around Him?

Those who know they are desperately sick, right? That's why He came, for sin-sick people. So listen, if we reflect Jesus' heart, if we really are all about pointing people to Him, that's who we'll flock here to.

I love the way Pastor Ray Ortlund says it. Gospel doctrine creates gospel cultures called churches where wonderful things happen to unworthy people for the glory of Christ alone.

That's the way it should be in the church. Jesus was known for eating with lost tax collectors and sinners. Lonely widows came weeping to Him.

[21 : 17] He welcomed little children others deemed insignificant. He cared for the poor and the least of these. He moved toward the left out and made them feel valuable insiders in His community because in all these people, He saw the image of God.

He engaged on that basis first rather than anything else. That's what we mean when we talk about leading with grace in relationships. What we mean is that the most important thing about you and so the basis of my first engagement with you is not your race, your gender, your orientation, cleanliness, your disability, your sin.

It's your status as an image bearer of God. That's how He sees people and how we must treat people with dignity and charity.

They're all welcome here. I remember seeing this in a pastor who walked Christy and me around London several years ago. As he showed us around the busy city, we passed many homeless beggars through the day.

He didn't have coins or food for all of them, but He didn't pass a single one without at least stopping to look them in the eye, often take them by the hand, and speak to them briefly.

[22 : 44] Good day, chap. God bless you, ma'am. They had other needs, but one of them was to be dignified as worthwhile.

The way God created them. The way He sees them. Are you starting to have names and faces come to mind in your neighborhood?

Maybe the annoying classmate no one plays with. Maybe the homeless guy who walks by you every day as you drive to work.

Maybe the special needs high schooler at the lodge on a Monday night. Maybe your weepy, seemingly hopeless neighbor who always needs someone to talk to.

They are all precious precious image bearers of God. Everyone you pass by each day, especially the ones who might not feel it from others, needs the welcome of Jesus.

[23 : 49] A pastor friend of mine says about this passage, we cannot legitimately disregard people, anyone, in the name of Jesus. In fact, welcoming means not just saying I'd treat someone nicely if they showed up in my life, but considering how I can move into theirs.

Jesus moves toward the least of these, doesn't He? Into their neighborhood, inviting them to dinner, listening to their stories and sharing my own struggles. That's what would make them feel welcome in a place like this.

That's how Jesus has welcomed us. Us. Listen, you can only welcome the least lost, littlest, lonely, and left out to the extent you have experienced that welcome yourself.

If you are a follower of Jesus, if He called you and rescued you, then Jesus says you were sick and lost. Those are the ones He came for, so that's us.

And so it's not inappropriate to say that at this table, Jesus comes to eat with tax collectors and sinners. That spiritually prideful, the ones who could never be good enough to be welcome in heaven, Jesus moves towards us with grace to welcome us home.

[25 : 12] You may have heard Ruth Graham tell her story at the funeral of her father, Billy Graham. Newly divorced and devastated, she found herself in another relationship her parents and children told her was not good for her.

But, in her words now, being stubborn and willful and sinful, I married this man on New Year's Eve and within 24 hours I knew I'd made a terrible mistake.

After five weeks I fled, I was afraid of him. What was I going to do? I wanted to go talk to my mother and my father. It was a two-day drive. Questions swirled swirled in my mind.

What was I going to say to daddy? What was I going to say to mother? What was I going to say to my children? I'd been such a failure. What were they going to say to me?

We're tired of fooling with you. We told you not to do it. You've embarrassed us. You don't want to embarrass your father but you really don't want to embarrass Billy Graham.

[26 : 17] So she takes the two-day drive home with those questions in her mind and she says, as I rounded the last bend in my father's driveway, my father was standing there waiting for me.

As I got out of the car he wrapped his arms around me and he said, welcome home. There was no shame. There was no blame.

There was no condemnation. There was just unconditional love. And you know, my father was not God but he showed me what God was like that day.

When we come to God with our sin, our brokenness, our failure, our pain, and our hurt, God says, welcome home. That's the welcome of God we are to extend especially to those who can't imagine it could be for them.

It's the welcome God extends to you and me when we don't deserve it and when we can't imagine it could be for us. Because in his family, wonderful things happen to unworthy people.

[27 : 32] Amen. Let's pray. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.

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