

A DISTURBING ABSENCE OF SCREENING

Scriptures: Mark 2:13-17

Several years ago I made my first trip to Mexico. I walked. I was at a pastor's conference in San Diego, and one afternoon during a break in the conference I took the street car to San Ysidro, got off, and joined a small crowd of people walking down the sidewalk toward signs that said, "Mexico." I just kept walking—down sidewalks, across streets, through a turnstile, up a ramp, down a ramp, through another turnstile, across a bridge, and suddenly I was in Mexico. The thing that shocked me is that no one stopped me. No one asked to see my passport or driver's license. No one inspected by my camera case, no one asked me where I was going, how long I would be there, or what I was bringing with me. I just walked across the border. I did not know I had even crossed the border until I was already in Mexico.

I remember on several occasions driving from Oregon to California. At the California border we had to stop at a fruit inspection station and be searched for produce. It's harder to get into California than it is Mexico.

Well, I walked around in Tijuana for a while, and then I decided to go back. It had taken me about 20 minutes to walk from the street car into Mexico. It took me almost an hour and a half to get back. I hit the line about a quarter mile from the border station. This was not the line of cars; this was the line of walkers. We slowly crept forward, and I as got near the front I could see that each person was questioned. Passports were not required at that time, but each person was asked to show some form of identification. I also noticed that Hispanic people were questioned at much greater length than Caucasian people. I remember wondering what I was going to do if they didn't let me back in. I had very little money and no cell phone. No one even knew I was in Mexico. It might be a day or two before they even started looking for me. My shirt was drenched in sweat, and it wasn't even that hot. Finally, I got to the front, and after looking at my driver's license, asking me how long I had been in Mexico and what I had been doing, the border agent waved me in.

Now here is my question. Which kind of border crossing applies to the Kingdom of God? What kind of screening is required for admission to the family of Christ?

The Pharisees took the U. S. approach. They were extremely careful about whom they admitted. They believe in thorough screening.

I can understand their feeling. Would it not make you nervous to think that people can just walk across the border into this country? That is precisely what bothers many people about the border with Mexico. In places people just walk across. But what if they have a criminal background? Or a terrorist background? What if they are carrying drugs or bombs? What if they have some communicable disease? When I visited Ellis Island in New York, I discovered that health was the number one screening issue for new immigrants to this country. There was great fear that someone might bring into this country a new easily spread disease. Shouldn't we guard against things like that at our borders?

That is how the Pharisees felt. If you let just anyone into your religion, you are in danger of contaminating it. Letting in tax collectors could totally discredit your group. Even worse, they might be a bad influence. Their presence could send a message that it is okay to cheat and steal in order to get ahead. In the Pharisees' eyes, Jesus exercised a disturbing absence of screening.

But for Jesus the border to God's Kingdom is more like the border into Mexico. Jesus seems prepared to let anyone in, even a notoriously suspect character like Levi?

Do you remember the guy who went on a honeymoon with his wife to Europe, even though he had a dangerously resistant form of tuberculosis? People were outraged that he had flown for hours on a plane with hundreds of other passengers carrying a highly contagious and potentially fatal disease. That is how the Pharisees felt about Levi. They considered him to have a resistant form of sin that could infect others if he were allowed to associate with them.

Here is my question: why wasn't Jesus worried about that? Why wasn't Jesus worried that a notorious sinner like Levi might discredit his movement, or even worse that Levi might infect the other disciples with his greed and dishonesty?

The answer is given in Jesus' reply. Jesus says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

Normally, if someone has a dangerous and contagious disease, you try to isolate the person. You quarantine them, just like the authorities did to the man with tuberculosis when he checked himself into a hospital. They quarantined him so that he would not associate with other people. But there is one exception: the doctor. Even if a person is quarantined, you always let in the doctor, because the doctor has the tools to deal with the disease. The doctor knows how to keep from catching the disease and how to prevent it from spreading, and in many cases the doctor can actually cure the patient who has the disease. The rules of quarantine don't apply to the doctor or to the nurses that the doctor has trained.

When it comes to sin, Jesus is the doctor. Sin is a communicable disease. The Pharisees are right about that. Sin is something you can catch from other people. But Jesus does not fear contamination from sin, because he has the tools to deal with it and to help us deal with it. That's why Jesus welcomes people like Levi and his tax collector friends. That's also why Jesus welcomes the other disciples.

If you noticed, the call of Levi, in our scripture reading for today, is just like the call of Peter and Andrew that we read two weeks ago. Mark, chapter 1, says, "As Jesus passed along the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him." Now in chapter 2 Mark says, "As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him." Do you see the parallels? Levi becomes a follower of Jesus in the same way as all the others: because Jesus chose him. Jesus called him.

In ancient Judaism people *applied* to be the disciples of a rabbi. It was like getting into college. You had to pass the ancient equivalent of the SATs before you were admitted. But Levi and the others did not apply to be Jesus' disciples. They did not pass certain requirements before they were accepted by Jesus; they were accepted before they even knew they needed him.

That is what Christians mean by grace. None of you are here today because you passed certain qualifications. You did not go through a screening process to be admitted into this church. You are here because Jesus wanted you here.

But that means other people in this church, the people seated around you this morning, are also here because Jesus wanted them here. None of us can look down on anyone else in our church as if they don't belong, as if they are unqualified to be here, because they would not be here if Jesus himself had not called them.

It is said that you can choose your friends, but you can't choose your relatives. Well the church is more like your relatives than your friends. The church is less like a club that you join and more like a family into which you are adopted. The people around you are here for the same reason as you: because Jesus adopted them. They may not be the relatives you would have chosen, but they are here for the same reason as you: because Jesus himself called them and has the power to make them well.

In my files I have a poem by an unknown author. It goes like this:

I dreamt death came, the other night, and heaven's gate swung wide.
An angel with a halo bright ushered me inside,
And there! To my astonishment stood folks I'd judged and labeled
As quite unfit, of little worth, and spiritually disabled.
Indignant words rose to my lips, but never were set free
For every face showed stunned surprise. No one expected me.

- Ken Onstot
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