

Something from Nothing

First Congregational United Church of Christ

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Texts: Matthew 9:9-13; Romans 4:13-25

When the preacher is of a certain vintage, so is the imagery this preacher will evoke. So I'm afraid you'll have to deal with it. The image that came to my mind as I looked at today's gospel reading was pickup games of baseball when I was a kid. A group of us—OK, I'll have to be honest--this was in the pre-enlightenment era—a group of us *boys* would assemble on a vacant field with our mitts and bats, and we'd organize a game. Somebody would toss a bat into the air; somebody else would catch it, and then two of us would strategically inch our way up the bat handle one, two, three, or four fingers at a time, until one of the two would have to cap the process at the knob, which meant that the other boy would get to choose first. And then we would pick sides. Every boy's nightmare was to be chosen last. It was a dispiriting sign of rejection.

I'd guess that all of us have experienced rejection in our lives. Proms, for example, could be traumatic: all that hype, all that expectation, all those preparations, and then the person we wanted to take to the prom said, "No," or that invitation we longed for never came. Or perhaps we didn't get accepted to the college we really wanted to attend. Some time ago I heard an NPR report about a student who had

perfect 800 SAT verbal and math scores and an admirable extra-curricular record who was denied admission by his top 17 college choices. He had applied to the most highly rated schools in the country, it's true, but think of it, 17 rejection letters to a kid who had performed perfectly on a standard tool for measuring academic achievement. Of course, the colleges insisted that they weren't rejecting this young man—they were sure that he would do well wherever he attended school—but it certainly must have felt like rejection.

And we know that rejection isn't just for the young. Perhaps you remember not getting that job you applied for, or that promotion. It was just the right job for you; you deserved a job with more responsibility and more compensation, but it went to someone else, maybe someone you just *knew* wasn't as well qualified or as highly motivated as you, and you felt both angry at the injustice and hurt by the rejection. Or there are those petty rejections that we continue to experience in life: the party we didn't get invited to; or the conversation group at coffee hour that we just couldn't seem to crash.

People deal with rejection in two basic ways. One is to be angry at the injustice of it all, and to move immediately into denial. "I didn't want to go to that dumb prom anyway. All that expense to go with someone I don't even like that much." And so on.

The second way we deal with rejection, though, is to consider it to be an accurate assessment of our worth. It's to allow someone else to determine our value. As Groucho Marx put it, "I wouldn't want to belong to any club that would have someone like me as a member." The problem with both of these reactions is the amount of power we give to other people, and their opinions.

In today's lesson from the Gospel of Matthew, we heard a rather brief account of Jesus' calling of Matthew as one of his disciples. It's brief, but it's a big deal. In Jewish religious circles, the reputation of a teacher—and Jesus was a “rabbi”—was, in large part, determined by the number and the caliber of students he attracted as disciples, students, followers. And the number and caliber of those disciples was determined by the brilliance and reputation of the teacher. It was a kind of self-reinforcing system: the better the teacher, the better the students; the better the students, the better the teacher's reputation.

So, in assessing Jesus, apparently a phenomenon on the Jewish religious scene, the scholarly and religious establishment paid close attention to the people who were drawn to Jesus, the people he hung around with, and particularly the ones he chose to be his students. Matthew was, according to the standards of the day, among the least likely to be chosen as a disciple by any self-respecting rabbi. His occupation was among the most despised. He was a tax-collector. Tax collectors weren't like our IRS agents; they were more like organized crime enforcers. They had their collection quotas assigned by the hated Roman occupiers, and then whatever else they skimmed off the top went into their personal coffers. They had no incentive to be kind and fair, and every incentive to squeeze the last drachma from the helpless subjects of a cruel empire and its local stooges. So, they robbed people, and they did so while working for their hated occupiers.

But Jesus called Matthew to follow him, and probably no one was more surprised by this than Matthew. And then, we're told, they all went to dinner at Matthew's home where there were still more sinners and tax-collectors. What a scandal this must have caused! But it wasn't the only surprising thing Jesus had done in assembling his entourage. His first disciples—Peter, Andrew, James and John—weren't scholars; they were fishermen. And he chose Simon the Zealot, who was a

professional revolutionary. That's what the word "zealot" means. And then this whole disreputable lot had dinner together with Jesus.

"What a bunch of scoundrels!" the respectable Pharisees clucked. "What kind of teacher is this, who dines with such a gaggle of nobodies?" This morning's passage from Romans reminds us that if you look into the scriptures for some insight into who God chooses to be God's instruments in this world, you'll find that almost all of them are "nobodies," or worse. It starts with Abraham, who had nothing, who could undertake his long journey only because he had nothing to leave behind and had no prospects for the future. Here's what Paul says as rendered by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*: "That promise that God gave to Abraham—that he and his children would possess the earth—was not given because of something Abraham did or would do. It was based on God's decision to put everything together for him. . . . God's promise arrives as a pure gift. We call Abraham "father" not because he got God's attention by living as a saint, but because God made something out of Abraham when he was a nobody."

And that kind of foolishness goes on. Joseph was a dreamer who was regarded as a worthless and lazy dreamer by his brothers, so worthless that they traded him away as a slave. And yet it was Joseph who saved those brothers and all of Israel from famine by his interpretation of dreams. And then there was Moses, an inarticulate herder of sheep who went on to become the liberator of his people. And there were all those prophets who were plucked out of the most common circumstances—shepherds, orchard-keepers--and chosen to be voices of warning and judgment for the rich, the powerful and the ostentatiously religious, and at the same time delivered a word of hope and liberation to the poorest and most oppressed. Nobodies. All of them.

Jesus himself was born a nobody, the child of parents too poor to find a proper room in a strange town for his birth; he became a political refugee before he could even talk. As an adult he became an itinerant preacher and teacher who hung around with misfits and sinners of an astonishing variety, and devoted an unseemly amount of his time and efforts to helping other nobodies, or worse: lepers, Samaritans, women, outsiders of all kinds. He lived most of his life not in the center of things but at the outskirts. During his ministry he only entered Jerusalem, the religious and political capital, just before the end of his life. And when he did, it seemed that he went out of his way to antagonize the very people whose approval could have made him a somebody. Instead he pronounced judgment on the city's injustices, and condemned its religious leaders. In fact, he kept telling his followers that his major purpose in coming to Jerusalem wasn't to conquer the city with his wisdom and his power, but to die there as an expression of God's self-emptying love. And die there he did, hanging on a cross between two thieves.

God doesn't choose people on the basis of their wealth and power, or on the basis of their accomplishments in life, nor does God reward those God has chosen with wealth and power and influence. In fact, those things often get in the way. The people that God chooses start out as nobodies, and then they are made somebodies not by their virtue or hard work, but by the unmerited grace of God. If we are full of ourselves, how can we have room to become filled with God's love? That's why Jesus told the rich young man that he had to get rid of all the things that he thought gave him value so that he would be empty, capable of being fulfilled, capable of living fully, deeply, a life with eternity embedded in it.

There is nothing in the gospel that seems more at odds with our accepted wisdom, and yet there is nothing more fundamental for our understanding of God's grace. In God's realm, there is a different way of being. The first become last and the last

first, those who are full of themselves are emptied of their pretensions, the nobodies are blessed by God's love and in the process become somebodies. God's love, we learn again and again, doesn't seek out value. It's God's love that gives us value. One of the highest compliments, maybe the highest compliment, paid to this congregation was when a member of another congregation in town, not to be named, said of us, "They'll take anybody." And yes, indeed, we will.

No matter how much you do, no matter how hard you work, no matter who your friends are, or how much money you make, you can't earn God's love. No matter how often you've failed, no matter how low on the social totem pole you may be, no matter how deeply you've disappointed others or yourself, no matter how useless you may feel, you can't remove yourself from God's love. Even if you can't put your baseball mitt on the correct hand, God will choose you first. God's love, to quote Paul, is a "pure gift," more precious than anything we could ever earn, more tenacious even than our sin.

So watch out where you hang out and who you hang out with. Jesus may just pass by and call you to follow him. And then, strap on your mitt. It's going to be a great game. Amen.