



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Encountering an Encounter" (Encounters With Jesus Series)

Jenny Sung

I want to tell you of a story of a recent encounter. It was a regular morning and I walked out to check my mail. I saw the resident manager running over, an obvious look of distress on her face. "What's wrong?" I asked her. And she told me that my neighbor had badly broken her arm.

We rushed over and it was clear the break was bad. Her wrist was swollen, skin almost purple, and bones clearly at an unnatural angle. Another neighbor drove her to the hospital and afterwards, I began to visit daily. I'd help her around the kitchen, opening jars and with things she couldn't chop with one hand. Her wrist was reset twice and her cast finally came off after six weeks.

In my daily visits we'd chat. In the beginning, it was mostly about her arm, how things were healing. I told her about my frozen shoulder and how I endured 11 months with little range of motion in my left arm. I'm 44, I guess she's in her 70s or 80s, but we commiserated together our common experience.

As time went on, our chats became more personal and I soon learned of her amazing life. She was an avid scuba diver and downhill skier, traveling around the world. Her favorite diving locations were in Micronesia, in Palau. Her living room

had beautiful different colored glass bottles with coral, something that looked like you would buy at the SoHa store—but she had collected it from the bottom of the ocean floor!

She had worked on a cruise liner and survived a shipwreck, like the Titanic, when the boat hit reef and sank. They had barely escaped on rafts. She had also survived a plane crash when the hydraulic fluid leaked out and they crash-landed without brakes. Her stories of adventure and survival were incredible.

I don't have time to share more stories of her courageous life, but I realized that I had lived next to her for 20 years and knew little of her story until this encounter...an encounter that's changing my life; an encounter resulting in deep affection and mutual friendship. She thanks me for helping her, but I realize that I'm the one who's being transformed by our encounter. Her love of all creation and zest for life inspires me.

I began to think of other encounters that transform, encounters that change who we are, and shape us into something different than before. Today's passage is a story of the *ultimate encounter*, an encounter with the One who loves us so much that not height nor depth or anything in all of creation can separate us from Him,

and the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39).

It's about the ultimate encounter that touches the core of who we are and leaves us nothing short of transformed. It's a story of an unlikely fellow who has an encounter with Jesus and is changed forever.

In the gospel of Luke chapter 5, we read of a tax collector named Levi, who is sitting at a tax booth. In another gospel he is called "Matthew", one of the twelve who became a disciple of Jesus.

In the previous chapter Jesus had come out the desert after 40 days of being tempted by the devil. He comes out of that "*full of the power of the Holy Spirit*" (v. 14) and begins His ministry, teaching, and preaching, and healing lepers and even a paralyzed man!

In Chapter 5 we pick up in verse 27. *After this, he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me."* ²⁸ *And he got up, left everything, and followed him.*

²⁹ *Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them.*

30 *The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"* ³¹ *Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; ³² I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance."*

As we look at Levi we see that he is a tax collector, a publican. At first, I thought of a tax man. What? Like H&R Block? Nooooo. This is quite different. The reputation of a tax collector was more like a thief, swindler, and traitor.

The publicans in Israel collected taxes for the hated Roman Empire. They were Jews who bought tax collection franchises from the Roman government. Any amount they collected over and above what Rome required, they could keep for themselves. So if you really owed the Roman government \$1,000 the publican might tell you that you owed \$1,500. And then the publican would send the \$1,000 you really owed on to the Roman government, and keep the extra \$500 for himself.

The tax collectors were very wealthy. In this way, many publicans became rich at the expense of their own people. They took and stole from their own people. And they worked for the Roman government, the enemy! No wonder they were hated!

Their reputation was so bad that as you find verses in the Bible about tax collectors, you start to see the point of reference as a bad reference—a bad reputation.

Luke 18:11 - *"The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other*

people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

Matthew 5:46 - *"For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"*

If you were to compare it to modern times, the reputation of a tax collector was like Bernie Madoff, the face of financial evil. He was the former Nasdaq chairman who was convicted of running a \$50 billion Ponzi scheme.

That is why the Jewish leaders criticized Jesus for going into the homes of the tax collectors and eating with them (Matthew 11:19, Mark 2:15-16).

To the Pharisees, the way to holiness was to separate themselves. Snd to associate with traitors and sinners was to defile themselves!

So back to Levi. He's sitting there. He is a despised person and everyone knows it. Even he knows it, and he's done what he's done for a long time. And it says in verse 27 that Jesus sees him. Jesus sees Levi!

Now let me ask you a question: "Have you ever been with someone and you feel like they don't even see you, like they're not even paying attention, like you're not that valuable to them?"

Or let me put it a different way, "Have you ever sat with someone and you feel like they see you, really see you and value you, a complete person, not just one way but they really see the whole you. They're not just looking at you; they see you?" How does that make you feel?

Being seen is an important point here because Jesus sees Levi, all of Levi. Not just one way. Not just the despised tax collector, the label, the judgment. Jesus sees more.

Now don't get me wrong, He sees the tax collector. He sees the sin; He doesn't ignore it. But He also sees the brokenness, the label upon him, the outcast. And Jesus sees him as a person of value, His beloved.

Jesus sees more than his past. He sees his future. And instead of distancing himself, Jesus gets closer. He leans in and says, "Come, follow me."

And Levi's heart is changed. He is broken. His heart is repentant. How do we know that? Because he leaves it all behind—all his wealth, all his past. He leaves it, all of it, and follows Jesus.

And Jesus told the Pharisees, I have come to call sinners to repentance.

Psalm 51:17 says, *"My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise."*

God does not despise a repentant heart, He rejoices in it!

What Levi has encountered and discovered with Jesus is the mercy and love of a Redeemer.

2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us, *"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"*

Levi is a new creation!

Now I don't know about you, but if I had just quit my job and left what was my source of income, I would be thrifty, saving my pennies.

But Levi does the opposite. In fact, he throws a party!!! He can't keep this to himself. There is sharing of this joy! "Guys look!" (similar to the Samaritan woman Ryan preached about a few weeks ago when she runs to the village and has to tell everyone about Jesus!)

It's like Cool and the Gang's song, "Celebration". Do y'all know that song? This is how Levi is feeling!

He invites Jesus and all of his friends. He has to tell others about the love of a redeemer! He has a great banquet... "a large crowd" it tells us.

This is a cause for celebration! And they're dining and eating together, reclining at the table, in kinship with one another. To dine with someone in the middle eastern culture is to bring them into your fellowship.

But when the Pharisees and scribes see this, they grumble, complain, and murmur against this to the disciples of Jesus.

Verse 30 says, *The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"*

Why? Would you do this? "Why do you associate with, dine with—go into fellowship with—tax collectors and sinners? They sit at the seat of judgment. They label and separate themselves.

But Jesus does the opposite. Jesus sees Levi, the state that he's in, and He doesn't separate...He comes closer. He comes as a physician, a healer, redeemer, and restorer. That is the heart of our God!

And the truth is, there are none who are righteous, right? The truth is there is nothing we can do or say to earn our own righteousness. All have fallen short of the glory of God. But we are now justified through His grace, as a gift, through the redemption of Christ Jesus.

Mike Pilavachi, a speaker at the HIM conference last week said, "At the foot of the cross we all are the same. There are no differences."

Father Greg Boyle is from Homeboy industries and his ministry is redeeming gang members in Los Angeles. Father Boyle is an expert on gangs and intervention and he has a really good TED talk, and I listened to some interviews he gave.

Father Boyle talks of imitating the kind of God that we believe in, about a world: *"where we obliterate the illusion that we are separate, where there's an idea that's taken root in the world that's at the root of all that's wrong with it—and it's the idea that there just might be lives out there that matter less than other lives.*

"It's about walking with Jesus and being a companion. And I haven't found anything that's brought me more life or joy than standing with Jesus, but also with the particularity of standing in the lowly place, with the easily despised and the readily left out, and with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop, and with the disposable so

that the day will come when we stop throwing people away.

"You want to move away from whatever is tiny-spirited and judgmental, as I mentioned. And you want people to recognize the truth of who they are, that they're exactly what God had in mind when God made them."

An encounter with God is to know of His love, not something that separates but someone who leans in closer to where you are. And that's because everything is based on who God is. It's His righteousness, His faithfulness, His goodness, His mercy, His unconditional love for everyone.

I'd like to invite you today to change the way you encounter. Perhaps it's a greater way you encounter the world, a greater way you encounter one another, and even perhaps the way you encounter God.

Maybe your image of God moves more and more toward the image of a loving Father. Maybe your encounters in the world are to increase your Sunday worship as an overflow to the rest of the week. Maybe your encounters with people are more like Levi sharing the joy of Christ to his friends and less like the Pharisees who grumble and separate themselves.

Maybe your encounter is to invite your friends to Easter. Levi threw a huge party. We're throwing a huge party in a couple of weeks and we're calling it Easter. He has Risen! And He's the life of the party. And we have set you up with some invitations to give your friends. You can pick them up at the front desk!

If you want to pray for a fresh encounter with Jesus, or you want to pray for a fresh way of encountering the world, your family, your relatives, and anyone else, please come forward after the service for prayer. The prayer team and staff will pray with you.

I'll end with a final story of encounter. Recently, I went to a two-week intensive course at Fuller Seminary, where I'm working towards my Masters in Global Leadership. We learned about character and leadership and the biblical theology of God's mission in the world.

Students were there from all over the world: Germany, Australia, Zambia, Uganda, Ukraine, Indonesia and Taiwan. It was like God's beautiful kaleidoscope, and the encounter changed my life.

We worshiped, we prayed, we cried, and more than ever before, I saw us—all of us—as part of God's great story. It's a love story that since the separation, God has been wooing His people throughout history to redeem and restore us back to Him.

Today is Communion, when we remember that in the fullness of time, Jesus Christ came into the world and went to the cross to die for our sins, to redeem us and restore us back to a loving relationship with God.

Colossians 1:13 ¹³ *He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

God comes as a healer of brokenness and as our redeemer. He calls us to a restored relationship with Him and with one another. And then

we are called out into the world—to our families and workplaces and businesses, to our neighborhoods and the Safeway's and the Starbuck's—to be the encounters that transform, that lean in with God's love, closer, deeper, wider, to be His forgiveness, His healing...to be love in Jesus' name.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, thank You for Your faithfulness and goodness. You call us deeper and deeper into Your love, and to be the expression of that love to those around us. As we take Communion, we remember Your body, which was broken for us, Your death and resurrection and the fellowship we have with You. May You be praised and glorified. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com