

The Way, Week 5

RAGAMUFFINS

Matthew 9:9-13

His name was Hector, and he was homeless. He was staying at the Samaritan Ministries shelter in Winston-Salem. One day he met three of our Main Street Youth. They prayed with him in front of the shelter, and then Hector said, “What church do y’all go to?” And they said, “Main Street United Methodist, in Kernersville!” And they invited Hector to come to church – and two weeks later, he did!

And you, my brothers and sisters, made Hector Perez feel loved, and accepted, and welcomed! And he kept coming back. And he joined the choir. And for a year and a half, Hector was a vital part of this family until he moved away because of his job.

Main Street: You were the hands and feet of Jesus for Hector Perez!

Just like you were the hands and feet of Jesus yesterday for our guests at Bethany Café. You served 178 meals to our friends from the community.

And just like you’ll be the hands and feet of Jesus next month at John’s Island. And this summer at ASP, and Recreation, and Kairos Prison Ministry.

There’s something you need to know about Jesus – he loves to hang around people that we might call “Ragamuffins” –

- The poor
- The broken
- The outcast
- The blind, the lame, the lepers
- The notorious sinners, such as tax collectors, and prostitutes

I got the word “Ragamuffins” from a book by Brennan Manning called *The Ragamuffin Gospel*. In that book, he tells about a valley girl who read through the Gospel of Luke for the first time. When she got done, she said, “*Wow! Like, Jesus has this totally intense thing for ragamuffins.*”

Today’s Scripture is one of my favorite Ragamuffin stories. It’s the story of how Jesus reached out to one of the most notorious sinners of his day. And if you’ll look at that now, I want to show you 3 Simple Truths from Matthew 9. If you embrace these truths, they’ll change your life. If we as a church embrace these truths, we could change the world.

Truth #1: We are all ragamuffins

The dictionary defines *ragamuffin* as, “a dirty, unkempt child.” Friends, that’s you and me before God! Isaiah says, “*all our righteous acts are like filthy rags*” (Isaiah 64:6).

Look at Matthew 9:12, where Jesus responds to the religious people who wondered why he ate with sinners: *[H]e said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."*

Now get this straight: he's not saying that some people are healthy and don't need him – he's saying that some people *won't admit* that they need him. The sick people who knew they were sick and asked to be healed – were healed. The sinners who knew they were sinners and asked to be forgiven – were forgiven. But the people who thought that they were both healthy and holy – were neither.

The truth is we've all messed up. The Bible says, "*No one is good – not even one...For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard.*" (Romans 3:10, 23)

Most of us in the church know that – but do we really believe it? Because I think if we did, there would be:

- a lot more humility
- a lot less conflict
- a lot more acceptance
- and a lot less judgment

I'm afraid that some of us in the church say, "OK, yeah, I'm a sinner...but I'm not a sinner like HIM!" But the truth is, when you get right down to it, WE ARE ALL RAGAMUFFINS. But here's the good news ...

Truth #2: Jesus loves ragamuffins

Look at verse 10 of Matthew 9: *And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples.*

In Jesus' day, the sharing of a meal was very significant. Nowadays we just plop down at the diner and whoever's beside us is beside us. But in the first century, in the Middle East, meal-sharing was a big deal. It was a sign of acceptance. It was the offer of a relationship. It was a symbolic gesture that carried with it a guarantee of peace, trust, and forgiveness.

To sit down and eat with someone was a big deal, so the religious people were very careful about whom they ate with. To them, religion was about keeping yourself pure. In fact, the word Pharisee means "separated" – they wanted to distance themselves from sin.

So imagine their shock when they see Jesus, who's supposed to be a religious teacher, sitting down and eating with sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes! To their way of thinking, this made no sense. Sharing a meal with sinners was a no-no.

And so, in verse 11: *When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"*

And the answer to that question is because Jesus loves them. JESUS LOVES RAGAMUFFINS.

Truth #3: Jesus created the church to show love to ragamuffins.

Verse 13: “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”

Jesus is quoting the Old Testament prophet Hosea. And what he’s saying is that God doesn’t want sacrifice, or religious ritual – all the things the Pharisees were good at -- but that what God wants is forgiveness and grace and mercy and compassion for other people.

And then, as if that doesn’t make the Pharisees mad enough, Jesus says one more thing: “For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

In other words, Jesus says, I’d rather hang out with sinners who know they’re sinners than with religious people who think they’re righteous.

Brennan Manning said it like this:

Jesus comes for sinners, for those as outcast as tax collectors and for those caught up in squalid choices and failed dreams. He comes for corporate executives, street people, superstars, farmers, hookers, addicts, IRS agents, AIDS victims, and even used car salesmen. Jesus not only talks with these people, but he dines with them...[Jesus] proclaims that he has invited sinners and not the self –righteous to his table...In short, Jesus hung out with ragamuffins.

--Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*

JESUS CREATED THE CHURCH TO SHOW LOVE TO RAGAMUFFINS.

So here’s my question: How did the church get so far away from Jesus’ original game plan?

Tony Campolo is a Christian author and sociology professor who has spoken here at Main Street. (I envy you all – I’ve always wanted to hear him speak in person.)

Tony tells the story of the time he was in Honolulu, Hawai’i and he couldn’t sleep so at 3 am he wandered into an all-night diner. The only other customers in the diner were a group of prostitutes who had finished their work for the evening. He overheard one of them, named Agnes, say that the next day was her birthday and she had never had a birthday party in her life.

After the prostitutes left, Tony asked the guy behind the counter, whose name was Harry, if that group came in every night. Harry said yes. Tony asked if he could come back the next night and throw a birthday party for Agnes. Harry agreed, as long as his wife could do the cooking and he could make the cake.

The next Tony got to the diner at 2:30 am and hung decorations and a huge sign that said, “Happy Birthday Agnes.” Word must have gotten out on the street, because by 3:15 am, “every prostitute in Honolulu” was in that diner. Tony said, “It was wall to wall prostitutes ... and me!”

At 3:30 Agnes walked in, and the whole diner erupted in a shout of “Happy Birthday!” Agnes’ knees buckled. And when Harry brought out the cake, she began to cry.

Agnes just stood there weeping and looking at the cake. Harry said, “Blow out the candles, Agnes. You have to blow out the candles. If you don’t blow out the candles, I’m gonna do it for you.” And finally, he did.

Then Harry said, “Cut the cake, Agnes. We all want some cake.” But Agnes looked at Harry and said, “Is it OK if we don’t cut the cake yet? I just want to look at it for a while. In fact, is it OK if I take it home?”

Harry reluctantly said, “Well, OK, I guess so...” Agnes picked up the cake and carried it out like it was the Holy Grail. Once she left, everyone in the diner stood there in awkward silence, not sure what to do.

So Tony broke the silence by saying, “What do you say we pray?”

He prayed for Agnes, for her salvation, for God to bless her and be good to her. And after he was through, Harry leaned over the counter and said in an angry voice, “Hey! You didn’t tell me you were a preacher! What kind of church do you belong to?”

And in one of those moments when just the right words come, Tony said, “I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.”

Harry said, “No you don’t. There’s no church like that. *‘Cause if there was, I’d join it.*”

Here’s what Tony Campolo wrote about that later...

“Wouldn’t we all? Wouldn’t we all love to join a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning? ***That’s the kind of church Jesus came to create.*** I don’t know where we got the other one that’s so prim and proper. But anyone who reads the New Testament knows that Jesus loved to lavish grace on the left-out and the used-up and the put-down. The sinners loved him because he partied with them.”

--Tony Campolo, *The Kingdom of God is a Party*

So here’s my challenge to you: Who are the ragamuffins in your life (other than yourself, of course)? Who are the poor, the broken, the outcasts, the notorious sinners in your sphere of influence? And how could you lavish grace upon them this week?