ROSE HILL CHURCH

Luke 5: 27-32
I Once Was Lost
"Trusting A Christian"

Rev. Brian North
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Today we begin a new sermon series titled **"I Once Was Lost."** The series name comes from a book of the same title, with the subtitle, *"What Postmodern Skeptics Taught Us About Their Path to Jesus."* This book has been on my radar for several years and has been recommended to me multiple times. Eventually, I decided it was time to read it for myself.

After doing so (even before finishing, actually), I became convinced that this book would be a helpful tool for equipping the saints here at Rose Hill. That's all of you, in case you weren't sure! I felt the best way to do that was through a three-pronged approach, as we do on occasion: a sermon series, encouraging you to read the book (free in the lobby!), and discussing it together in small groups that Betty Berg has eagerly organized (sign up in the lobby!). So, last July, I scheduled this series to kick off the new year.

As it turns out, one of the co-authors of the book, Don Everts, is here from the Midwest visiting family in Western Washington this week as we start the series, and he graciously agreed to join us this morning. (Invite Don forward.) Don is a pastor in our denomination, though I don't think we've met before, and he leads a church in Springfield, Missouri. Also, he's related to Tim and Elaine Weltz—he's married to Elaine's step-sister.

Don, I have to tell you: Tim and Elaine have been talking to me about you for years. And mostly they've said good things about you… 😂 All kidding aside, thank you for being here. We really appreciate it.

- Why did you write this book? (what non-Christians were telling us about their journey to faith - common themes)
- What take-aways have been most helpful for you personally? (as a reluctant witness, so helpful to realize conversion is not binary, there's a journey - this takes some of the pressure off me, makes me more curious about my friends' journey)

- What can people expect if they lean into this book and topic? (excitement and peace related to witness, clearer empathy for non-Christians in your life, next steps for how to be helpful to the non-Christians in your life)

Thank you, Don! As he mentioned: **In the book, Don describes what he calls "thresholds"—key moments or hurdles that non-believers often cross on their journey toward Jesus.** These thresholds are not hoops to jump through, but relational and spiritual barriers that need to be cleared. As Christians, we can either help people move across these thresholds, or we can become obstacles ourselves. The goal of this series is to help us be helpful.

There are five thresholds identified in the book. Each week, we'll look at one of them alongside a passage of Scripture. Then we'll conclude the series with a sixth and final message drawn from the last chapter of the book, titled "Beyond the Thresholds." That's where we're headed.

The first threshold is simply this: trusting a Christian. For many non-believers, this alone is a significant hurdle. The reputation of Christians is not always stellar, and trusting a follower of Jesus can be difficult. What we'll look at today is helpful not only for building trust with non-believers—such as family members, neighbors, coworkers, or classmates—but it's also applicable to virtually every relationship regardless of their spiritual condition. This sermon applies to marriages, sibling relationships, parent-child relationships at any age, work relationships, and more. So, let's turn to God's Word and see what insight we're given about building trust. Our passage this morning is **Luke 5:27–32.**

A bit of context will help us here. This takes place early in Jesus' ministry. He has not yet fully gathered his twelve disciples, though Levi will become one of them. Levi is almost certainly the disciple we later know as Matthew, with "tax-collecting" being the big link. Throughout Scripture we see followers of God receiving new names—Simon becomes Peter, Saul becomes Paul, Joseph becomes Barnabas. Levi may reflect his tribal or family name, while "Matthew" becomes his "disciple name."

Levi is a tax collector, working for the occupying Roman Government. Because he is Jewish—as his name suggests—this means he's a traitor in the eyes of his fellow Jews. **It's safe to assume that he carried a lot of social judgment, suspicion, and shame.** Kind of like a college football quarterback breaking his signed contract and ditching his team for another, only to have to come back to the first team because of legal ramifications. Not that that happened recently here or anything! Lots of judgment, suspicion and shame.

Verse 27 tells us that Jesus *saw* Levi. But the word Luke uses here is anything but casual. He doesn't see him like you might see any random tree out in the forest or the walls of our sanctuary. **The Greek word is *etheasato*, from the root *theaomai*—the same root we get the word *theater*.** *Theaomai* means to look at something attentively, to behold, to contemplate, even to learn by careful observation.

Luke could have used a more ordinary word for "see" (two of them) but he intentionally chooses this one. Even more significant is the form of the verb: aorist, middle, indicative. Without getting lost in grammar and putting you all to sleep, here's the point—**Jesus did not accidentally notice Levi. He deliberately, personally, and decisively saw him.** Not as a stereotype. Not as "that sinner" or "that tax collector," but as a person worthy of attention and invitation.

For someone like Levi, being seen that way was probably rare. And here's the takeaway: **Trust grows when people sense they are not a project, but a person.** When we approach someone with the mindset, "I'm going to fix this person," that attitude communicates itself—whether we intend it to or not. It creates distance, not trust. Yes, Levi was broken. But so are we. And the posture of "fixing" someone never leads to a healthy relationship (always a bad approach to starting a marriage). People must first be seen as image-bearers of God.

Jesus then invites Levi to follow him, and verse 28 tells us that Levi gets up and follows. The grammar here indicates ongoing action. This isn't a

momentary decision or a few hours with Jesus. Levi's following is continuous.

Importantly, notice what Jesus does not do: He doesn't preach a sermon. Yes, it's an ironic observation to make—in the middle of a sermon. 😀 I'm putting my job in jeopardy by highlighting this, but it's true: It's not a sermon or a lecture or a teaching that Levi responds to. It's Jesus himself. It's a reminder that we aren't there to fix people, and we don't lead people toward Jesus by lecturing or highlighting their faults. That approach (lecturing) erodes trust and closes doors to relationship. We want to first build trust.

Later, Jesus goes to Levi's house where Levi has invited many guests. And there, Jesus does give a bit of a sermon – but it's to some of the religious elite at the gathering, not Levi. And it's a response to their critique of him, where Jesus summarizes his mission: He's focused on reaching sinners, not those who believe they are already righteous.

Put it all together, and we see Jesus building trust with Levi. Jesus doesn't judge him. Doesn't lecture him. Doesn't avoid him (another common response, because it's human nature to hang out with people who are similar to us and avoid those who are different). Jesus simply sees him in a deeper way—created in God's image—then calls him, and then spends time with him. And even though Levi is following Jesus, Jesus is still willing to enter Levi's space. Jesus goes to Levi's home, attends the banquet, and engages community. Jesus won't participate in sin…but he'll gladly be present with people, because presence builds trust.

In the second chapter of "I Once Was Lost, "Don Everts and Doug Schaupp highlight 5 ways that we can build trust. They call them "5 Kingdom Habits to build trust." They are:

Five Kingdom Habits To Build Trust:

1. **Pray**
2. **Learn**
3. **Bond**
4. **Affirm**

5. **Welcome**

Let's look at these through this passage and Jesus' ministry. We see a few of them here in today's reading, and all of them throughout his life.

First, we don't explicitly see Jesus praying in this passage, but throughout the gospels, prayer is central to his life and ministry. There's no doubt about that.

We do see Jesus learning about Levi here. It's embedded in how Jesus sees Levi. One of the meanings of *theaomai* is "to learn by looking." Jesus does that here. Elsewhere Jesus frequently invites people to tell him their story. "You've been bleeding? You've been blind? You're Thirsty? You're possessed? How long? Tell me more about that? What do you want me to do for you?" Even when he already knows the answer, he asks. We see that trust grows when people feel known, and we know people by learning about them.

Third, Jesus bonds with people. In today's passage, Jesus goes to Levi's house for this banquet. Now, it's thrown in Jesus' honor, but surely Levi asked him first if he could throw this party. Jesus could have said, "Nah, I need to get to bed early that night for ministry the next day." No. Jesus realizes this *is* ministry, not a distraction from it. By investing this time and energy, he builds trust as he bonds with Levi.

Fourth, Jesus "affirms." Jesus never affirms sin, but he consistently affirms people. He restores dignity when others shamed; restores identity where labels have been imposed; he publicly validates peoples' worth. He does it with Levi simply by seeing him as something other than a hated tax collector and also by attending the banquet at Levi's home. He does it with the woman who was bleeding for 12 years: Jesus calls her "daughter" – she too has a place in the family of faith; The woman who anointed Jesus' feet with oil – we looked at this passage a couple months ago in Luke 7 – is affirmed as one who loves God, in front of others who labeled her "a sinner." Jesus regularly builds trust through affirming people.

Fifth, Jesus welcomes people. He invites people into relationship and conversation, regardless of their social status, morality, or reputation. He does that with Levi the tax collector here and does it throughout his ministry. Having a welcoming attitude and approach to people creates space for trust to grow.

These five habits—pray, learn, bond, affirm, and welcome—are essential in every relationship. When they are absent, trust erodes, whether it's with a believer or non-believer. Specifically with non-Christians, when we develop a new relationship with a non-believer, we Christians are frequently operating from a place of relational deficit, because many people have experienced judgment rather than grace from believers. Trust never got built.

The unfortunate result is that: **Too often, people reject Jesus not because they've examined Jesus closely, but because they've never seen him embodied in someone they trust.** So, who in your life needs help to cross this first threshold? Who might God be inviting you to build trust with? Before people can hear the gospel proclaimed—before confession of sin and faith in Jesus—there are a few thresholds that many people need to cross through. The first is this: they need to see the gospel embodied. To see it lived. And that journey often begins with ordinary, imperfect, but *trustworthy* Christians like us. Let God work through you to build trust with others, and therefore open the way for them toward Jesus. Let's pray…Amen.