

“Moving on Up”

[Mark 2:13-22](#)

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February 25, 2024

I’ve driven across North America twice –when we moved to Ontario back in 2011, we took the northern route through Canada, and then last summer when we moved here, I took the faster route back through the United States. And when you drive from coast to coast, passing through all these little communities along the way, you quickly notice that just about every town has a hometown hero, some local boy or girl who started out in that little corner of the world and made it big. In the Canadian towns, it was usually a hockey player, like Bobby Orr from Parry Sound or Sidney Crosby from Cole Harbour, but sometimes it was a famous actor or comedian, maybe an astronaut or Nobel Laureate. On the highway sign welcoming you to town, it’ll say “Home of So-and-so” or “Birthplace of Famous Guy”, or there’ll be a major street or a high school or library named after the town’s most famous former resident. Because it’s always a *former* resident. To make it big, to become famous enough, important enough to get your name on the town sign, you kind of have to leave town. You can’t become the world’s greatest hockey player staying in Parry Sound – at some point, you have to move up to the big leagues, you need to start playing with better teammates and against stronger opponents in arenas packed with thousands of screaming fans and millions more watching on TV. You can’t become a world famous movie star doing community theatre in Moose Jaw – you have to move up to bigger roles, bigger stages, to Hollywood and Broadway. And once you’ve moved up and moved on to bigger and brighter and better things, you probably won’t come back all that often to that tiny little town where you started out – you’ll come back to visit family for the holidays, or when they name the high school after you to pose for some pictures, maybe you’ll catch up with your old friends, the guys you used to play hockey with back before you were great. But you probably won’t stay. Once you’ve moved up to the big leagues, once you’ve become a big deal, there’s not much reason to stick around back at the bottom where you started out.

And you would expect that to happen to Jesus in our reading from the gospel of Mark this morning. It sure looks like Jesus is ready to move up to bigger and brighter things. That's how it usually works with all these preachers and teachers and miracle workers wandering around trying to make a name for themselves – if you're any good, it's only a matter of time before you start moving on up. You start out preaching in little towns to little people, fishermen and farmers – you gain a few followers from these ordinary folks, the average students who were reasonably bright but not a lot of potential. But then eventually you leave these small towns and small people behind and move up to preaching in the bigger cities, get followers with more connections, more talent, and eventually, if you play your cards right and don't get yourself killed by the Romans, you make it all the way to Jerusalem, where the really great preachers and teachers get cushy seats on the Great Sanhedrin, the high council of all doctrine and law for the people of Israel, they get invited for dinner at the high priest's house, their sermons get written down and passed around from synagogue to synagogue and eventually added to the Talmud, this great collection of commentaries on the law and the prophets written by all the greatest rabbis who ever lived. That's how it's supposed to work, that's the road that any aspiring teacher has to travel, and Jesus has made a great start – he made a huge splash in the small towns and villages in Galilee, his preaching and his miracles has electrified every community he visited, he was a sensation – but being a sensation in Galilee is like being the greatest hockey player in Parry Sound or the greatest actor in Moose Jaw – it's a good start, but you've got to start moving on up. These fishermen you've called as your disciples, they're great while you're in Galilee, but let's face it – they're not the sharpest tools in the shed. If you want to make it to Jerusalem, you need to take Peter and James and John aside and gently tell them that they've been a great help, but it's time to go back to fishing. It's time for Jesus to recruit a new batch of disciples to help him make it big in Judea and Jerusalem, disciples with connections to the priests and judges and rulers in the big leagues. And Jesus would've had all sorts of bright, ambitious candidates lining up at his door, resumes and letters of reference in hand, offering to take charge of his operation and help him make the jump from two-bit prophet in the sticks to a power player in the capital, to become one of the greatest rabbis of all time.

That's what you would expect would happen, and that's probably what some of these Pharisees were thinking Jesus would do – they're expecting that now that he's going to make his move to the big time, he's going to recruit some real all-stars, some A-students, some people who look a lot like them. And instead, out of all these impressive candidates, for his next disciple, Jesus picks Levi. Levi, son of Alphaeus. And Levi is not the person you would expect Jesus to pick. He is not an A-student. He's not even a C-student. He's the student who dropped out of school and started dealing drugs behind the 7-11. He doesn't have connections – not to the Sanhedrin, or the priests, or anyone respectable. He's a tax collector. He works for the Romans, for the bullies, for the empire that's ruining the world, flooding the streets and homes of their cities with soldiers and violence and cruelty and death. Levi is not a step up for Jesus, he's a disaster. Jesus is supposed to be moving up in the world, he's supposed to start surrounding himself with a better class of disciple, people with connections, people with resources, people who can take him on to better and brighter things, and Levi and his crowd of disreputable scoundrels are not a step up, they're a step down.

And that's the point. Jesus isn't trying to move up in the world. Jesus isn't trying to make a name for himself, make connections, make himself famous, make himself great. He isn't moving up. He's moving down. What these Pharisees don't understand is that Jesus didn't start at the bottom, in the two-bit towns and mean streets of Galilee. He started at the top. He started with all the power in the universe. He started out as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Alpha and Omega, the Creator of everything that is and was and ever will be, he started at the very top, and then he gave all of that up, and came down. Down to the bottom, the very bottom, to the lowliest places and the lowliest people imaginable. The entire point of Jesus' ministry, the entire point of his existence, isn't to make himself bigger, better, brighter, more famous and wealthy and comfortable. In Jesus Christ, God plunges right to the deepest point of human existence, God goes down to the bottom to lift those at the bottom up. People like Levi. Levi, and all the scoundrels and sinners like him, people who know they're sick and need someone to heal them, people who know they're at the bottom and need someone to lift them up. Levi is important because Jesus decides he's important, Jesus decides he's worth coming down all the way from the highest places in the universe to take hold of Levi and lift him up and

make him a disciple, Jesus came for Levi and all the other disreputable scoundrels and troublemakers in Galilee and Judea and all across the world. And not just for them – Jesus came for those Pharisees too, for the so-called A-students who already think they're important just because of who they are and what they've done, but who aren't quite as smart as they think they are, aren't quite as good as they believe themselves to be. Jesus came to save even those self-important types who haven't figured out yet that they need healing and help and rescue just as much as Levi does. Because the only thing keeping those Pharisees from receiving that forgiveness and mercy and love is the illusion that they don't need it. They still think they've got something Jesus needs. They still think that they're going to help give Jesus a boost on his way up, and they haven't figured out that they're the ones Jesus came down to rescue, they're the ones Jesus came to save.

And the church today is still full of all kinds of people, all doing our best together to do God's work and share God's love and proclaim God's word to a world in need. And sometimes we get so caught up in that work that we start thinking it's all about us, about how brilliant we are, about how hard we're working, about all the little things we're doing to make God's kingdom grow, and isn't Jesus lucky he's got us on his team? But the truth is that no matter who you are, whether you're an A-student or a dropout, an all-star or an also-ran, never forget that Jesus Christ came to the bottom for you, to rescue you from yourself, to save you and strengthen you and set you free. And he didn't come for the versions of ourselves that we like to picture ourselves being – the competent, talented illusions, the people we put up on our social media profiles with carefully curated pictures always catching our good side. No, he came for us at the bottom, when we were at our very worst, at the moments in our lives where we failed, completely and comprehensively, Jesus sees us in those moments we try to hide, we try to forget, when the whole world around would write us off as scum, disreputable sinners not worth saving, that's when Jesus loves us and forgives us and calls us to be his. And that's what makes us important – that's what makes our lives matter, makes us capable of transforming the world around us – not anything we've done, but because we know that Jesus has come down to us from the very top to the very bottom, to lift us up. And the only thing that can keep him away is when we start thinking that we're already important, that those false

versions of ourselves we've built up are the real deal, when we think we're really who we pretend to be and we start looking at the people around us as unimportant, unworthy of being saved instead of recognizing them as people just like us, people who know we are sinners, who know we need the healing Jesus Christ can bring. Today, may we be like Levi, disreputable sinners who hear the voice of Jesus Christ calling us to follow. May we leave everything else behind to join him in celebration of the God who comes to the bottom to lift us up and give us life and set us free. In the name of Jesus Christ – AMEN!