

The Scandal of Particularity

The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity

October 15, 2023

Matthew 9:1–8

Every few years or so I preach a sermon on the scandal of particularity. Every sermon is actually a sermon that proclaims the scandal of particularity, or at least it ought to be so. But it's good every so often to actually examine it and consider why there is such a thing. Usually when I bring it up people look at me like I'm speaking about some strange notion. But if we truly desire to understand the heart of God and grasp His Holy Scriptures then we need to embrace the scandal of particularity.

It is a scandal in that it is an offense. It is particular in that it is exclusive. The scandal of particularity shows up throughout the Bible. Right off the bat we see that in the beginning *God* created the heavens and the earth. The universe did not come about through chance but because God spoke it into existence. And this God who created everything is not just any god but the God who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. People believe in many gods and have many religions but the claim of the Bible is that the Triune God is the only true God.

The scandal of particularity shows itself in God choosing one man, Abraham, to be the father of God's chosen people. Out of all the people in the world God called one man. God chose one particular people, the descendants of Abraham, to be His holy people. But the greatest scandal of all is Jesus. God became a human being. He appeared here on this earth in this particular person, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus declared Himself to be God and the only Savior. This was so offensive that He was killed for it. Even the greatest news of all, the pure Gospel, the death and resurrection of Jesus, is scandalous to the unbelieving world. It means that we are all sinful and need a Savior. Who wants a religion where you have to believe that we are not good enough on our own? First Corinthians 1 expresses the scandal of particularity in this way: "We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."

The Gospel reading today is filled with the scandal of particularity. Some people brought to Jesus a man who was paralyzed. What does Matthew say happened when this man was brought to Jesus for healing? Jesus saw their faith. You and I will see someone who is strong in the face of difficulty and we'll say that they have great faith. But it could just be a front. We can't actually know what is in the heart and mind of a person.

But Jesus peered into the hearts and minds of these men. He saw their faith. Of course most people don't believe that, do they? That's the scandal of particularity. This man, this particular human being Jesus, can see into the inner being of people to know what they actually believe. For many people that is preposterous and they reject Jesus as God.

But there is more cause of offense. Jesus doesn't heal this man who is paralyzed. He tells him, "Have courage, son, your sins are forgiven." Don't you just wonder what his friends were thinking? "We brought our friend to Jesus because we believed that Jesus would heal him, and he's being told about his sins being forgiven?" Was the paralyzed man himself asking, "Can't I

be forgiven of my sins at home or by going to the temple? What I need right now is for Jesus to give me the ability to walk.”

Well, we don't know what these men were thinking. But we know that Jesus is declaring to everyone there that there is something wrong with this man, and it's not that he is unable to use his arms and legs. This man is a sinner. He has a far greater problem than being paralyzed. He needs his sins forgiven. Jesus knows that everyone there is expecting Him to heal this man but instead He forgives His sins. The religious leaders there were offended, this is the scandal of particularity, after all. They said, “This man is blaspheming.” In other words: Who can forgive sins but God? They are right of course. No one has that actual authority or power except God. You or I don't. They didn't. Even the paralyzed man couldn't forgive his own sins. Only God can. So the religious leaders were offended, because Jesus was blaspheming. He was ascribing the authority and power that only God has to Himself.

Jesus is claiming divinity, but that's easy enough to do. To respond to the religious leaders Jesus will demonstrate it. He asks them if it's easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” or, “Get up and walk.” It's easy enough to declare a person is forgiven and you can continue to claim you are God. But if you tell the person to get up and walk and he remains paralyzed then you are shown to be the fraud that you are. Jesus told the man exactly that, to get up and walk, and that's what happened. Did this turn the hearts of those religious leaders? No, they remained deeply offended by this man. This particular person was the very Son of God. There is salvation in no one else. There is forgiveness in God alone and it is through His Son Jesus.

This passage ends with the crowd of people glorifying God, and so it might appear that it is no longer dealing with the scandal of particularity. But even here we see it. It's in the last word, men. They rejoiced that God had given such authority to men. That is, God has given His authority to forgive to people, human beings. This remains deeply offensive to people today. Before Jesus ascended into heaven He designated particular men, the apostles, to carry His ministry and forgive people's sins.

There are those still today who react to this in the way those religious leaders did to Jesus: “Who are you to forgive my sins, you are just a human being like me.” But God has indeed given such authority to human beings. Pastors are indeed like everyone else, they are wretched, sinful people. But this authority to forgive sins is by virtue of the call Jesus Christ gives to them as His servants of the Word. The pastor is speaking in the stead and by the command of the Lord Jesus Christ. The sinful nature rebels and says, “No, I only need forgiveness from God! I don't need to hear it from a fellow human being.”

But this forgiveness is God's forgiveness. It is a scandal and it is particular. But see why God does it this way. The scandal of particularity shows the heart and glory of God. In one person, Jesus Christ, salvation is accomplished. He paid for the sins of the world on the cross. Because His forgiveness and salvation is particular you know exactly where to find it. It is in your Baptism. It is in the proclamation of the Gospel. It is in the pastor forgiving your sins. It is in the Lord's Supper.

You are forgiven and you follow God's will. As you do you will be maligned because you believe what the Bible says, that there is only one God and He is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. People will say you are prejudiced for believing that God has created human beings in His image and that He created us male and female. And because you stand up for those in the womb and those at the end of life. All of this is the scandal of particularity. These beliefs exclude all others. Because people are offended by them you might wonder if you should still hold to them. Know this, Christ has forgiven you your sins. He taught all these things and they are good. He loves everyone and gives us salvation in Himself alone. The best way for us to love others is by embracing the scandal of particularity and living our lives in conformity with His sacrificial love and forgiveness. Amen.

SDG

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