

Transformation U: Navigating Uncharted Waters

Jeremiah 31:31–34 • Matthew 9:9–17

Matt. 9:9 As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

Matt. 9:10 While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

Matt. 9:12 On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Matt. 9:14 Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

Matt. 9:15 Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

Matt. 9:16 "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. ¹⁷ Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."

When I graduated from high school, I thought I was pretty hot stuff. By all accounts, I was an excellent writer, reader, study-er—I felt like I had the complete academic package. As I went off to college, I thought, "I got this!" But the professors expected a lot more reading than even I was used to—multiple, heavy readings a week, and for one class a book a week! I thought I was hanging in there, and then I got my first paper back. I got a D+! In my life, I had never gotten a grade that low! What was going on? I realized I couldn't just keep doing what I was doing if I was going to make it in college. I was going to have to find a new level. I had thought I knew what I was doing, but now I was in uncharted waters. As I look back at my life, I have had other moments of transformation like that. Maybe you have too. What are some moments in life when people have to transform in order to reach a new level or grow into something new? Let's think together for a moment, shall we?

[Take responses from the congregation.]

So the question is how do we level up? How do we transform our lives, so that we can become something more? As it turns out, our passages today are talking about transformation too, and through Jeremiah and Jesus, we can gain some new wisdom for navigating uncharted waters.

First, move from following rules to understanding principles. Lots of us like rules, especially if you're an oldest or only child, you like rules. Why do you think people like rules?

[Take responses from the congregation.]

There's some safety in rules, right? Which works great as long as the rules work. But what happens when the rules stop working? Stephen Ambrose, in his history of D-Day, describes one of the key differences between the Nazi forces and the Allied forces. When the attack began, many of the Nazi companies tried to contact headquarters to get permission and directions, but communications were scrambled or slow. The rules for the Nazi forces were to wait for instructions, and so they did, and failed their defense that day. In sharp contrast, during their preparations, the Allied forces had their objectives drilled into their heads. When many of the officers were cut down on the beaches, still the remaining troops found creative ways to reach the top of the bluffs, and were able to continue on to achieve the objectives, even without their original commanding officers. Jesus' is talking about something similar when he says, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" Though they kept all the rules, the Pharisees had missed the guiding principle: that God loves everyone, and Jesus was living that out by hanging with the people who needed mercy most. When we have to go to the next level, when we need to be transformed, what we really need to understand are not the rules, but the principles underneath the rules.

Second, move from external motivation to internal character. Ken Blanchard, in his sweet little piece, *Leadership by the Book*, writes about the time he went to a nice restaurant with a friend who had once managed a restaurant. Ken and his friend were sitting at a table, eating and chatting away. A couple came into the restaurant, and waited to be seated. They were completely ignored by all the staff, though there were plenty of tables open. At first, Ken's friend just glanced in the couple's direction. Then he looked over more frequently. After a few minutes, Ken's friend got up, walked over to the couple, welcomed them warmly, and helped them to an empty table. The friend came back to the table, and Ken asked why he had done that, since it wasn't even his restaurant. The friend replied, "I just couldn't bear the idea of them not being taken care of." For this hotel manager, the importance of welcoming and taking care of people was not just something he did when the boss was looking—it was who he was. In a similar way, in Jeremiah, God talks about how the Children of Israel had strayed, broken the rules, forgotten to be grateful, and failed to put God at the center of their lives. When the consequences came in 587 BC, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, burned the Temple to the ground, and took the best and brightest into Exile. Through Jeremiah, the Lord says, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." Loving God and loving others will not be about the rules or obligation, so much as a change of heart. In the same way, Jesus doesn't just want those who follow Him to do kind things, Jesus wants us to become kind people. When we need to go to the next level, when we need to be transformed, people telling us what to do will no longer work, we will need a change of heart.

Finally, move from clenched anxiety to open-handed joy. Have you noticed how anxious people are these days? What are some of things that might make people anxious in our society?

[Take responses from the congregation.]

The problem with anxiety is that it makes everything harder and a lot less fun. For these folks, life is a roller coaster, and if you like roller coasters that's great. But if you don't like roller coasters, then you hold on tight and pray that it'll stop soon. Anxious people are always trying hard and they see only one way to be. That's what's going on for the Pharisees: "What?! Jesus is hanging out with tax-collectors and sinners? Doesn't he know where that could lead? Pretty soon no one will be safe." Or John's disciples: "Why would Jesus party? Doesn't he know following God is all about fasting and denying yourself? This is serious business. Now I don't know if Jesus was line-dancing at Matthew's house, but it seems like they might have been having a good time, and that's what life is meant to be: Good News. When we are anxious, it's hard to be open to new ideas, or to be curious about how other people approach life, or to be generous with our time and effort. Clenched, we cannot receive. Open-handed, we can receive and give. Instead of anxiety we find joy!

In college, I had to want to learn, had to accept I really didn't know how to write or read, in order to get to the next level. I was still a student, but now my capacity for learning was even greater. Whenever we reach a key moment of transformation, we will need to leave an old way of being and doing if we are to become who we need to be. Three years ago, COVID pushed many churches—including ours—to try things they never would have tried, and you know what? Many of them worked! COVID reminded us of some of our guiding principles—worship matters in people's lives, gathering is fundamental to being the people of God whether that's in-person or online, and if we pay attention, we know God will give us a way through. Last fall, our fellowship came to a wildly improbable conclusion: that our building was keeping us from becoming the church God wants us to be. Somehow, God has something better, more resilient, more powerful, and more life-changing in mind for us. How will we get to the next level? How will we transform? That's the real question, but as Jesus and Jeremiah suggest, if we are going to navigate the uncharted waters ahead, we are going to need to drill down to basic principles, one of which is "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." And we are going to need God to change our hearts. That inner transformation has always been at the core of following Jesus. We will still be the warm, open-hearted, make-a-difference fellowship we have always been, but gradually we will have a higher capacity to love and live like Jesus did. Getting closer to Jesus, internalizing His message of amazing grace and steadfast love, will help us navigate the uncharted waters of our lives, and help us become beautiful, forgiven, accepting, and so full of God's grace that others will be transformed too. And don't you think the world could use a little more joy?