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“I did not come to call the righteous but sinners” (Matt 9:13).

In today’s reading from Genesis we see how determined Abraham was to trust the promise God had made to him regarding his progeny and their homeland in Canaan.

After waiting until Abraham was in his 90s, God finally gave him and Sarah a son, Isaac. When Sarah died, Abraham purchased a burial site in Hebron, and then turned his attention to finding a wife among their kin for Isaac to make sure he did not marry a Canaanite woman. With both actions, Abraham was securing the future he believed God had promised his heirs by blood and land.

As the covenant was passed from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob, a profound tribalism defined the “Chosen People” based on bloodline and family inheritance. The practice of circumcision had to do with distinguishing Jews from uncircumcised pagans to exclude them from the line of transmitting the promise.

Disdain for foreigners came to characterize strict rules for marriage and association with pagans. The greatest hostility was directed at Samaritans, Jews who had remained behind and intermarried with the pagan invaders at the time of the conquest and deportation of loyal Jews.

This background helps us understand the tensions between Jews and Samaritans at the time of Jesus. It also explains the fury directed at Jesus by purists like the scribes and Pharisees for his freewheeling attitudes toward pagans and his practice of eating with outcast Jewish tax collectors and other public sinners in today’s Gospel.

Jesus was a scandal not just because he defiled himself but also because he was weakening the social order and religious stability of his own culture.

We do not have to go very far from these Biblical readings to realize that tribal purity and racial divisions still define our world. Modern travel, communication technology, economic interdependence and normal migration patterns are seen by some as threats to national identity, especially by those who believe in their own racial superiority.

Jesus' radical vision of the Kingdom of God in which everyone would sit down together at the same table became the church's mission to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Discipleship is a life of continuous expansion of our personal borders to welcome people who are different than we are. The courage to do this is the wisdom that leads us to God, whose love defies all borders and distinctions and makes us all chosen people.

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