

A Curious Situation

Karis Smith - July 20th, 2025

My husband Josh, who will be speaking next week, and I were in southeastern Washington two weeks ago and we got to go fishing with some friends. It was dry and hot, and we were in a beautiful canyon with the river down below. As we were scrambling down the slope our friend casually mentioned there were rattlesnakes in the area. Having never encountered a rattlesnake before, I was on high alert: looking around, while at the same time thinking to myself, I really have no idea what to watch for or what to do if I find a rattlesnake! Well, no snakes magically appeared, and we got into the river and started fly fishing. It was peaceful and perfect, except the fish apparently were not hungry, and after a good long while of no bites I decided to change locations. So I waded to the shore, stepped out onto a rock— and heard that distinctive rattling sound that we have probably all heard in a western movie. I looked to my right and about three feet away under a bush, I saw something striped. And let me tell you: rare is the time that I've moved faster than I did in that moment! Being naturally curious people Josh and I investigated - though Josh was significantly calmer than I was, and found a rattlesnake that was about two and a half feet long. To my relief, he mostly seemed to be cranky that I had invaded his napping space and was overall quite docile. Thankfully we went our separate ways without incident.

I tell you this to illustrate how quickly our brains can process threats. They are hardwired to take information and form assumptions for our protection. To paraphrase neurologist Beau Lotto, *“if you're not sure something is a predator, it's too late. So your brain takes meaningless data from your senses, and makes meaning from it. That's the process of creating perception. And from our perception we create assumptions that we hold on to and become that very stable over time.”*

We form assumptions or opinions of other people just as quickly as I formed an opinion of that rattlesnake. Perhaps you've met someone and your instincts immediately kicked in to tell you, “this person seems really safe” or on the other hand perhaps they said, “This is not good, stay away!” And chances are very good you believed those instincts - they've come from your experience, from what your brain is perceiving in the moment, and they help protect you.

Through these assumptions and opinions, we categorize people into two groups, and I'm going to need participation from you to illustrate the two groups.

Hands up if you:

- Are a hockey fan
 - Cheer for Canucks
 - Cheer for a different team
 - Don't follow hockey at all
- Different topic, hands up if you:
 - Like the taste of cilantro
 - Think cilantro tastes like soap or a stinkbug

So you may have guessed it, the two groups we categorize people into are those like us, and those not like us. The Ingroup and the Outgroup. “Us” and “Them”.

“US”

- Ingroup
- Insiders
- People we identify as similar to us

“THEM”

- Outgroup
- Outsiders
- People we identify as different from us

That line between “Us” and “Them” can be physical, social, economical, moral, you name it. I grew up in a family that was very involved in church leadership both locally and provincially. Some of the opposing Us-Them groups I developed were “our” denomination and “those other” denominations, “we” the righteous Christians and “them” the fallen from grace, or even “we” who can eat anything and “those” people who have food intolerances. As it turns out, *I* am intolerant to dairy, so that last one did not work out well for me.

Some specific things that may cause you or I to categorize someone as a “Them” are homelessness, ethnicity, political stance, different views of or participation in the LGBTQ community; having tattoos, an accent or difficulty speaking english; someone having premarital sex or choosing to drink alcohol, or choosing to NOT drink alcohol, or having a second marriage, and yes, even whether someone likes the taste of cilantro or not.

What I want to know is, what was Christ’s response to those who were different from him? Those who were on the outside of that line between “Us” and “Them”? The best place to find an answer to that question is scripture, so the text we’re going to look at today in Matthew 9 starting at verse 10. Jesus has just called Matthew (aka Levi) the tax collector to become a disciple and they are now at Matthew’s house.

Matthew 9:10-11 NASB

10 Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and began dining with Jesus and His disciples. 11 And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, “Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?”

A curious situation... It seems from the Pharisees’ question that this is a strange occurrence. So what’s the context here? What does it actually mean that these people are sinners and tax collectors?

[Biblehub provides the following definition](#), which gives us some insight:

The term "sinners" in the New Testament generally refers to those who are seen as living outside the covenantal laws of Judaism. This includes individuals who engage in behaviors considered immoral or contrary to the Mosaic Law.

Tax collectors... were particularly despised in Jewish society... Their role was seen as a betrayal of their own people, and they were notorious for extorting money and enriching themselves at the expense of others. As a result, they were often lumped together with "sinners" as social outcasts.

Jesus choosing to eat with Matthew and his friends was NOT socially or morally looked upon with favor. But what was his response? We see it in verses 12-13:

Matthew 9:12-13 NASB

12 But when Jesus heard this, He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. 13 Now go and learn what this means: 'I desire compassion, rather than sacrifice,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

I like how Eugene Peterson puts this whole passage in the Message, as I think it gives us an idea of what the overall tone of the interaction may have been.

Matthew 9:10-13 MSG

10-11 Later when Jesus was eating supper at Matthew's house with his close followers, a lot of disreputable characters came and joined them. When the Pharisees saw him keeping this kind of company, they had a fit, and lit into Jesus' followers. "What kind of example is this from your Teacher, acting cozy with crooks and misfits?"

12-13 Jesus, overhearing, shot back, "Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? Go figure out what this Scripture means: 'I'm after mercy, not religion.' I'm here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders."

Can you imagine a similar scene in today's age? Perhaps the dinner guests would consist of folks that only go to church once or twice a year, prostitutes, drug addicts, unethical businessmen, ex-Christians, or maybe even drug dealers. Would you show up to a dinner like that if you were invited? And yet... Jesus ate with them and even clapped back at the Pharisees when they questioned him. I can almost feel the suppressed excitement and disbelief that the dinner guests may have felt when they realized Jesus was going to engage with them instead of scorn them.

We see similar examples of Jesus engaging with outcasts and morally questionable people a lot in the Bible. A couple of examples you can look into would be the stories of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, and Zacchaeus (another tax collector) in Luke 19. Jesus stretched the mold, offering dignity to the outcasts. Loving them and engaging them, offering acceptance instead of shunning.

We often treat those across the line from us with fear, many times viewing them as inferior to ourselves in thought, position, or righteousness. Someone to avoid. We build walls of indifference, or skepticism, or dislike between us and them. Not always, but often. Let me ask you - when was the last time you passed a homeless individual, and instead of avoiding eye contact you looked them in the eye, and smiled? I can tell you the last time I didn't do it - last week. Engaging with someone who we've marked as a "them" is very difficult. And I'm the first to admit I'm not good at it.

Years ago my husband Josh entered a public washroom to find a homeless man using a washcloth to take a spot bath. Josh started talking with him and asked the man's name, which was Tim. They discussed some of his life both at present and historically. At the end of their conversation Josh said "well, it was nice to meet you Tim!" and Tim started weeping, explaining that that was the first time someone had used his name in *years*. In that moment the line between "Us" and "Them" disappeared. Tim felt seen, and known, and he regained some dignity.

It all comes down to this:

Romans 5:6-8

6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

For a time in my own life I would have been one of the disreputable characters that Jesus ate with. If God can look at me, and see all of me, and love me in spite of that - enough that he chose to experience death and hell so that I could be reconciled to him - surely I can look at someone across the line, work to truly see them, and to love them with the same generosity Jesus showed those tax collectors and sinners, and that he has shown me.

When I was 18 my world was deeply shaken by the deaths of two people who I loved dearly. This triggered the beginning of a five year season in which the foundations and assumptions I had built my life on came crashing down. My life spiralled and I made choices that were damaging to myself and many others. Though I kept my belief in God, I struggled deeply as I tried to navigate this new world that was so far from the life I imagined I would live. In short order I found myself on the wrong side of the line dividing “Us” from “Them”, and I was squarely in the outcast camp. At that time I desperately needed the body of Christ to surround me with love and a generous spirit. But instead, for those 5 years I experienced an increasing rejection and distancing from my family, friends, and the Christian community. I withdrew in anger, but also fear and shame. It wasn’t until my sister had the courage to meet with me, ask some hard questions, and say, in essence, “I see you now, *and* I still love you” that those relationships began to heal. It was scary to have that conversation, for a long while I wouldn’t have been able to have it. But it *couldn’t* have happened unless my sister had taken that first step of deciding to be curious and ask questions.

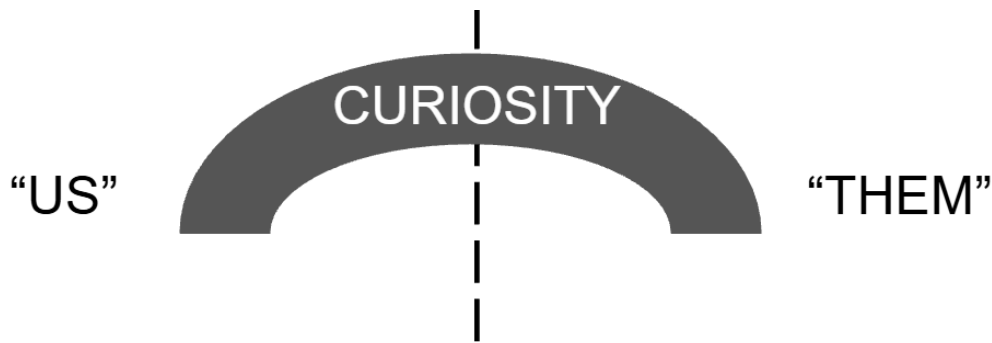
It’s not a short road, it’s not an easy road, especially because hurt is rarely one sided. But I believe that God has called us as his children to be the initiators of offering genuine, active love to those we view as “Them”. And that’s incredibly difficult and uncomfortable.

Application

So where do we start? How do we go from closed off and dismissive to connected and relationally generous with people across that line? There’s one simple suggestion I have (simple, but not easy), and that is to **Create a curious situation**.

Research professor and author Brené Brown says this in her book *Atlas of the Heart*: “*Choosing to be curious is choosing to be vulnerable because it requires us to surrender to uncertainty. We have to ask questions, admit to not knowing, risk being told that we shouldn’t be asking, and, sometimes, make discoveries that lead to discomfort.*”

We’re uncomfortable or fearful of what we don’t know - leaning into curiosity helps us face that unknown. Creating a situation inside of ourselves where curiosity is our practiced response to people who are different from us begins to deconstruct the walls we’ve built between “us” and “them”. And curiosity helps us build bridges of connection, which in turn grows empathy and kindness.



Let's repeat the experiment we did earlier but change up the questions. Everyone raise your hand, keep your hand up if you have ever:

- Felt really embarrassed by something you did or a situation you experienced.
- Have been really hurt by someone.
- Have experienced laughing so hard it hurts.

Thank you, you can lower your hands. We all or nearly all have these experiences in common with each other.

Earlier we discovered areas that highlighted our differences (hockey fan vs not, like cilantro vs not), this time around we found areas where we could connect. Curiosity can find these areas of connection and build bridges there.

Perhaps you've already got some ideas of where you could get started, but if not, there's three steps I'd suggest to help kickstart curiosity:

- 1. Ask yourself: Who do I view as "them" and who do I view as "us"?**
- 2. Examine what you feel towards "them" and ask yourself, "Why?"**

I want to give us some time to think about these two questions. If something comes up as you are thinking, I'd encourage you to dialogue with God about it.

The last step to kickstart curiosity is to look outward and:

- 3. Be curious about others' lives: what's a success or loss in their life?**

Some suggestions to keep in mind going forward for both yourself and others in this process:

- Be gentle, painful things can surface and gentleness is a good approach.
- Be ready for imperfection - things are usually a lot more grey and messy than we prefer.
- Be ready to forgive yourself and others for failings, they are going to happen.

Closing prayer.