

Do You Need A Doctor?
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Matthew 9:9-13 (NRSV)

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

[10] And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. [11] When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" [12] But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. [13] Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

DO YOU NEED A DOCTOR?

Do you need to see a doctor? That question is not always easy to answer. Sometimes we don't know if we are sick or not until it is too late.

I had a friend, a fellow minister who was a father of small children. He was a dynamic young man who looked to be the picture of health. One summer he went with his family on a vacation to Disney World. While at the park he fainted and was rushed to the hospital. He was diagnosed with a brain tumor and was dead within a week.

He needed a doctor. But, he didn't know it. There was a disease inside him that developed to the point that he lost his life.

I'm sure many of you could tell similar stories. That's why our spouse urges us to get our annual physical. But, even with an annual physical there is no guarantee. What we can't see and what we don't know about our health can hurt us.

Jesus tells us in our lesson for today that the same is true when it comes to our spiritual health. Have we had a spiritual checkup lately? Do we know that all is well with our soul? Do we need a doctor?

The Bible teaches us that it is dangerous and misleading to think that just because we are religious and go to church each Sunday that we are the picture of spiritual health. On the contrary in the Bible those who are outwardly the most religious are often the ones who need the most help.

FALL FROM GRACE

We assume that religious leaders should have a certain standard of morality, that they should be compassionate and forgiving, and that they should somehow embody the love of God. And yet almost every day there seems to be a revelation about some religious leader who has gone down the wrong path.

Ministers are convicted of sexual misconduct. Church leaders abscond with the church's funds and cripple that church financially to the point that it is forced to close. A leading evangelist develops a pyramid scheme that rivals the work of the best con artists.

And people of faith are shocked by these revelations. How could things like this happen? How could those that were entrusted with the care of God's people be such scoundrels? How could they have been such wolves, preying upon unsuspecting sheep instead of being the shepherds that they were called to be?

Now we can explain these problems away. We can say that they were hypocrites that they didn't really mean what they said. We can say that all human beings can be tempted and can make mistakes.

Those statements are true of course. But, for me the more important question is: "How did this happen?" Many of these people did not set out to fail themselves and others in such spectacular ways. How could these people betray what they believed in most deeply? How could they deny their faith in such a dramatic way?

In our lesson for today Jesus is confronting some religious leaders who have also lost their way. Instead of giving the people a feast of hope they are giving them a steady diet of despair. Instead of offering forgiveness these leaders are offering judgment and exclusion.

And the problem, according to Jesus, is due to the fact that these leaders just don't know that they themselves are sick. They are inflicted with the spiritually fatal disease of self-righteousness. It is a disease that remains hidden until it manifests itself in some dramatic fall from grace.

In the gospel story religious leaders even crucify the Son of God. They murder the very person who loves them and comes to save them. Jesus was the cure for what ailed them, and they killed him.

FALSE SALVATION

Sometimes people who are ill seek healing in all the wrong places. Do you remember the clinics in Mexico that supposedly were treating cancer with the miracle drug, Laetrile? It was a false hope. There was no salvation in that drug, and many people died early and maybe even needlessly because they put their trust in this false hope.

If you are ill you need a board certified physician.

And if you are sin sick (as we all are since the Bible tells us that all have sinned and fall short), then you need the real Great Physician and not some phony substitute.

We need a spiritual doctor who tells us what we need to hear instead of what we want to hear.

WALKING AWAY FROM THE OLD LIFE

We, all of us, desperately need help. And the first step in receiving the help is to admit that our life is out of control. All the things that we thought were so important have proved to be unimportant. And the only way out of this mess is to get up, walk away from the old life, and follow Jesus.

That's what Matthew did in our lesson for today. Commentators have speculated down through the years why Matthew followed so readily the call of Jesus. Jesus told Matthew the tax collector to come follow him and Matthew just got up and left his job. As one commentator put it,

“Matthew, unlike the other disciples, stood up from a table at which he could never sit at again. The others could always return to fishing—but Matthew's decision immediately separated his future from his past.

Matthew's decision would also change his position in life. He went from being powerful and rich to dependent and unemployed. His life would now fully count on Christ's mercy to provide his every need.”

Why in the world would Matthew make a decision like this?

Professor Tom suggested that it was the power of Jesus' word. At the word of Jesus the sick are healed and the storm is calmed. In the same way at the word of Jesus a new community is formed. The church is formed when Jesus says, “Come follow me.”

That's true.

There is power in the call of Christ. It is the power of Christ that creates a new community of faith that is based upon grace and forgiveness instead of judgment and power.

RELEARNING THE FAITH

But, why did some respond positively to the call of Jesus while others rejected him in the strongest way possible?

What made the difference?

What separated the tax collector, Matthew who left everything to follow Jesus from the Pharisees who rejected Jesus completely?

I think that answer is found in Jesus' comment about a physician. Some realized that they were sick and needed a physician. Their symptoms were open and apparent.

And some thought that they didn't need any help. They didn't realize that they had the most deadly spiritual disease of them all.

They were the leaders of God's people, but according to Jesus they needed to go back to school. Jesus told these self-righteous religious leaders,

“Go and learn what this means,
'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'
For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

HOSEA'S EXAMPLE

The religious leaders may have needed to go back and learn, but it wasn't advanced knowledge. It was theology 101 from the prophet Hosea. Many of you remember that Hosea might be labeled as the book of undeserved love. As a most unusual sign of his great mercy God told Hosea to marry a prostitute.

And, surprise, surprise the prostitute was not faithful to her marriage vows. Again and again she is unfaithful to Hosea. But, again and again God tells Hosea to forgive her and take her back.

Now according to the law she did not deserve this mercy. According to the law she deserved to die. (The law in those days was much like the strict law in some Muslim countries. Prostitutes and unfaithful wives were stoned to death.) But, God did not want Hosea to give her the treatment she deserved under the law. God wanted Hosea to show her mercy.

Why did God have Hosea do this?

Hosea's life was a parable of God's love. Instead of giving people what they deserved God gave them mercy. Over and over again God's people went after other gods. For God it was like a husband or wife being unfaithful to their marriage vows. But, though God's people were unfaithful, God was always faithful. God never gave up on them. He always took them back.

And that's the message that God brings us today. Though we are often unfaithful and turn our backs on God, God never turns his back on us.

LEARNING THE LESSON OF GRACE

And so, if God has done this for us, his unfaithful people shouldn't, we show the same kind of mercy toward others? Amazing grace comes to us first from God, but according to Jesus it cannot stop with God. Grace must flow from God to his people to those whom society thinks is outside the bounds of grace.

The question is how can we learn this? What seminary can we attend? What graduate program will make us understand that God desires mercy instead of ritual and love instead of hate? Unfortunately this is one of those lessons that cannot be learned in school. The religious leaders whom Jesus lectured were the highly trained intellectual leaders of the day.

And today the situation has not changed that much. People with PhDs in New Testament theology often demonstrate by their actions that they don't understand much about mercy. People who never miss Sunday school or church often demonstrate by their actions that the lesson of grace has never made it into their lifestyle.

Where can we go to learn this lesson, that God desires mercy above all else?

Unfortunately, this kind of learning only comes from the school of hard knocks. This kind of learning only comes when we have hit bottom spiritually and learn to our horror the truth about who we are before God. We have sinned and fall short of God's glory. (Romans 3:23) The prophet Isaiah tells us that all our righteousness before God is like "filthy rags". (Isaiah 64:6)

Over the years I have learned about God's mercy not in my successes but in my failures. When you look at the stories in the Bible you see the same pattern.

When the people in the Bible feel strong and in control they see no need for God and go their own way. But, when they are broken by circumstance and sin, then they learn the meaning of mercy. And perhaps for the first time in their life they are really ready to seek God's kingdom first.

TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS

I think this is why Matthew was able to walk away from the tax table and walk with Jesus. He may have been rich in things, but he was desperately poor in spirit. Matthew was a man who had a hard time sleeping at night.

You'll remember that tax collectors were leg men for the Roman IRS. They collected taxes for the enemy and then tried to pocket as much as they could for themselves. It was good for the Romans, good for the tax collectors, and very bad the people.

But, this monetary gain came at a very high price. Tax collectors were totally rejected by their people. The phrase often used in the Bible is "tax collectors and sinners." The two terms were synonymous.

And yet these rejected people who could not sleep at night were the very ones who were able to follow Jesus. The consistent criticism of Jesus was that he ate with tax collectors and sinners. Eating with someone was more than just saying "let's do lunch." In the ancient world (as is true to a certain extent today) going home with someone for a meal was a sign of acceptance.

If you ate with the wrong people you risked getting a bad reputation. Jesus consistently attracted and ate with the "wrong" people.

WWJB

A while back people were encouraged to wear a bracelet with the letters, WWJD. That, of course, stood for "what would Jesus do?" But, maybe a better bracelet might be WWJB. That

stands for “where would Jesus be?” In order to have a relationship with someone you have to spend time with that person.

In order to spend time with Jesus those first disciples had to leave their old life behind and follow Jesus. Jesus was always on the move. Jesus was always going home with the tax collectors and the sinners and other outcasts.

And I would suggest to you that this is where Jesus is still found. Don’t think that Jesus is just in this church building on Sunday morning where everyone is well dressed and smiling.

Quite often you will find Jesus with the sinners and the tax collectors. Quite often you will find Jesus with those people who have lost everything because they are addicted to drugs or alcohol.

Quite often you will find Jesus among those immigrants who are looked down upon by the people of our society because they speak a strange language and don’t fit in to our way of doing things.

Quite often you will find Jesus in the prisons where families and lives have been broken in terrible ways. Quite often you will find Jesus in the hospital room where a family has learned that the news is not good.

In these places and more where hope is in short supply and people are looking for salvation you will find Jesus.

These broken people know that they need the Great Physician. They know that they are broken by life and need a new start.

Do we know that this is true of us as well?

Do we seek to be merciful toward others because we need that same mercy ourselves?

GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER?

If you want to spend more time with Jesus, you have to modify the guest list at your dinner parties! Do you remember that old movie, “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” It was about a pretty young white girl who was bringing the man she wanted to marry home to meet her parents.

But, much to her parent’s surprise and chagrin the young man she brought home was African American.

The movie was a humorous and touching look at the state of race relations at that time. The father and mother had taught their daughter to be open and accepting of all people, but bringing a black man home as a potential mate went beyond the bounds of what was accepted at that time.

Today, thank goodness this is less of an issue.

Some of us who lived through the racial tensions of the 1960s are amazed and delighted that a candidate for President of the United States can talk candidly and I would say lovingly about his multiracial heritage.

No matter what your political leanings I think that all of us can agree on one point. We hope that the events of the past few months mean that the guest list has been expanded when it comes to who is welcome at the table in our country.

But, as followers of Jesus the “guess who’s coming to dinner question” has always been an important and often controversial one.

Throughout the history of the church, religious leaders have misunderstood their role. They thought it was their job to decide who went to heaven and who went to hell. These religious leaders thought that they had the keys to the kingdom, and they were determined to make sure that heaven would be a comfortable place filled with people just like themselves.

But, Jesus has other ideas. Jesus is always expanding our guest list beyond what we find comfortable. Entrance into his kingdom is not based upon merit but upon grace, and that marvelous grace is greater than any of us can imagine.

When we take Communion we make it plain that the guest list is quite extensive and expansive when it comes to the Lord’s Table. People will come from the East and the West; people will come from the North and the South. Some will speak Spanish. Some will speak Portuguese. Some will speak English. In fact all the languages of the world will be spoken at the Lord’s Table.

What’s that song we used to sing as kids, “red and yellow black and white they are precious in his sight?” That’s the vision for God’s kingdom, a greatly expanded list of guests for dinner! None of us has a dinner table that is able to accommodate such a large crowd, but Jesus has a table that has room for all.

ONE THING IN COMMON

I like to say that we in Florida come from all over the country, but we have one thing in common. We never want to shovel snow even again!

In the same way those of us who come to the Lord’s Table come from all over the world, but we have one thing in common. We are sinners saved by grace. We deserve judgment, but God has shown us mercy. We have been broken by life and our sinful ways, but God in Christ has chosen to lift us up.

What drives your life? Why do you do what you do?

In our lesson for today Jesus reminds religious leaders (and he reminds us) that the motivation for our life should be the grace of God.

The apostle Paul put it this way. He said, “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8 (NRSV)

How do you respond to a love like that? I would suggest that the only response is gratitude. Out of gratitude we are given the power to show mercy and love others ... even those who are hard to love.

And the only way to miss that love is to miss the gratitude, to somehow miss the fact that we need God’s mercy every bit as much as the next person.

Friends, we do need a doctor, and there’s only cure. As the old hymn puts it, “Grace, grace marvelous grace ... grace that is greater than all my sin.”

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)