

“OUR GOD THE PATRON OF LOST CAUSES”


Message for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

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HOSEA 5:15-6:6 ❄ ROMANS 4: 13-25 ❄ MATTHEW 9:9-13, 18-26

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

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

And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means."

How would you feel if today, since we'll be eating in a little while, if Jesus showed up with a really rough looking bunch of men and women, say some Hell's Angels and a few recently released murderers and rapists from prison? Would you try to find the nearest exit door to get out as soon as you could? Remember, Jesus came to meet people where they were."

A tax collector named Matthew accepts Jesus' invitation to become his disciple. There's no talk of money, of salary, of having control of the Temple treasury, just two words, "Follow me," Matthew got up and followed Jesus. Matthew is a tax collector or he was a tax collector and he can be a rough collector but if you give him what he wants, you won't have any problems with his IRS, his Infernal Robbery Service! So you're at a dinner celebrating his acceptance and Jesus makes an important statement about the difference between a Pharisee and a disciple.

Matthew inserts a story about his own call to be a disciple of Jesus and what happened at a dinner he gave for Jesus and his other disciples. When certain Pharisees got wind of the dinner, they criticized Jesus for hanging out with sinners and tax collectors, that is, disreputable people. Ok, so maybe we aren't disreputable people but all of us are sinners; how would the Pharisees handle us?

All three Synoptic gospels have a story about the call of the tax collector. Mark and Luke call him "Levi;" only Matthew identifies him as "Matthew," traditionally considered the author of this gospel.

Jesus encountered Matthew while he was at work, in his booth, collecting taxes. As with fishermen, Jesus calls his disciples while they are at work, living their routine lives. The taxes in question would be customs duties on goods passing through on the great road from Syria to Egypt or possibly at a toll booth near the lake on goods coming across the lake. Tax collectors were typically among the most hated of people, especially in Palestine.

In the Roman system and Rome occupied Palestine at this time, the office of tax collection was awarded to the highest bidder. The winner of this right would employ others to do the actual work of collecting taxes. Thus, Matthew might well have been a middle level employee, rather than a rich man in his own right. However, he and any tax collector could become rich through extortion. It was permissible to charge a certain amount over and above the tax required in order to receive compensation. That's how the tax collector got paid. The more the tax collectors collected, the more they were hated, and the more they were hated, the more they collected. Tax collectors had three strikes against them even before they came to bat.

Jesus said to him, "Follow me." There is no mention of a previous conversation and no hint that Jesus and Matthew had met before. The emphasis here is not on the conditions that led Matthew to accept, but on his unconditional acceptance. Matthew left a whole way of life in order to follow Jesus. He may well have been wealthy, but perhaps only on his way to wealth. Nonetheless, he left it all and followed Jesus. Fishermen might and did, return to their former occupation, but not tax collectors. Rome would not hire him again, should he have changed his mind and tried to return. This was an irrevocable commitment, one made without knowing the "benefit package."

Many tax collectors and sinners came: This note sets up the scenario for Jesus' pronouncement regarding whom he came for. One would not expect the guest list

for a party held to honor a religious teacher to be replete with sinners and tax collectors but that is just what happened. These were social outcasts.

In verse eleven, “When the Pharisees saw this,” the Pharisees would not have been at the dinner, but like many “reputable,” and “respectable,” people, they were nosy. They liked to observe everyone else living their lives, perhaps out of jealousy that their own lives were so dull, thanks to their religion. Can a person, namely a Pharisee, be so bored with being ‘perfect’ that they want to sin? Their entering the house is highly unlikely, however, given their fear of becoming “unclean,” themselves by virtue of close association with the unclean. Matthew is probably telling us what happened afterwards, when they heard about it through the gossip mill.

The Pharisees would have considered themselves among the “well,” and the tax collectors and sinners among the “sick.” Jesus left that to them, but he was saying he came to meet people where they were and help them to get to where they should be. He did not come to frown on, to condemn, to isolate or to shame those in need of salvation, nor did he come to side with the gloaters, the smug, the arrogant.

Oh, the life of a Pharisee! They worked so hard to get it right with God, and seemed to get it all wrong. They had rules and regulations. They knew when to come to the temple, how to behave there. They knew how everyone else was to behave. They knew who was good enough to be there and who wasn’t. The life of the temple was the center of their lives. This was, no doubt, a great sacrifice but, “Hey, who else would do it?” There was all this about clean and unclean. They knew about duty; they wrote the laws; they enforced them because after all, God must be concerned with the details of ritual and ceremony, looking to blast all those who faltered. The task was tough but they were up to the challenge.

Then along comes Jesus. He breaks all the rules, muddies the water between righteous and unrighteous, even between clean and unclean. He eats with sinners, enjoys the company of the unclean, heals indiscriminately. And now he has invited himself to the house of Matthew, the tax collector. There was no one lower on the scale than a Jew who would sell out to the Romans collecting taxes from his own kind. But Jesus came to their kind. Jesus said, “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” The biggest stumbling block for the Pharisees was that they had convinced themselves that they were the righteous and were miserable enough to prove it. They had the calluses on their knees, they knew the laws and kept them, they had the scorecards to prove it. They had made the appropriate sacrifice.

When Luther joined the monastery he could not accept himself nor could he find peace among his fellow monks. In the monastery Luther struggled to maintain the highest standards of piety, morality and self-discipline. His own memoirs recount that he lived in constant fear of the righteousness of God. For Luther, God's righteousness was modeled after human righteousness. Luther thought that God also was struggling to maintain the standards and to punish all who failed to live up to the rules. Luther joined a club with high standards, but he did not want to be a member of a club that would accept people like him as members.

Luther's great discovery came in his personal struggle reading Scripture. The righteousness of God was not God's wrathful eye and avenging sword waiting to execute all the objects of his wrath. God's righteousness is found in Jesus' words today, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Luther discovered the righteousness of God as grace, mercy, and loving-kindness. For Luther the gift of God's love requires us to humbly join a club that accepts people like us as members.

We meet a woman like that this morning.

We know about her because she comes to Jesus.

There is something wrong. This is not how she wants it to be. She doesn't want us or anyone else to know about her. She wants to keep it a secret.

And no wonder.

Life was a total embarrassment for this afflicted woman. She had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. That is a polite way of saying her period never stopped. Ever!

This would be a hardship for any woman today, but it was far worse for a Jewish woman in the ancient world. During her cycle, a woman was unclean; no, unclean did not mean dirty, even though it sounds dirty. Unclean meant you couldn't worship; you couldn't touch another person; and all your bedding and every chair you sat in had to be ritually purified and until it was purified, it was off limits to anyone.

Imagine now this woman is living in a single room house with her husband and family. The house would be about the size of most of our living rooms. She had to have her own bed, she could not sleep with her husband, she had to have her own

place to sit. It would have been forbidden for her children to sit there. She would have to go through the humiliation of scolding her children if they came near her seat. She would hear their sorrowful protests, 'Why momma?'

Imagine every time she left the house, having to be prepared for the flow of blood. With the primitive hygienic methods of the day, she probably seldom ventured out into the daylight.

The gospels of Mark and Luke also tell the story of this unfortunate, sad woman. In them, we read that the woman had visited every doctor and specialist in the region. Not only could none of those doctors help her, she had bankrupted her family in the effort to be healed.

Here are some cures for menstrual problems from the ancient world and most of them are rather crude; the safest, if that's the right word, was a dressing with a mixture of chopped onions, mash and pine sawdust; she must eat fresh donkey liver.

She comes to Jesus in secret. She has to. She has hopes from what she's heard that if she comes into contact with him, she will be healed by his power.

Do you see her problem? She cannot touch a man in public. Jesus is walking by with his disciples so he's surrounded by men. Jesus is surrounded also by the crowd who would have mostly all been men too. "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well."

She fights her way through this crowd that surrounds Jesus and succeeds and touches his garment. Jesus turned and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well." He felt some power escaping him. And the woman was made well from that moment.

She has broken every convention, she has violated God's law in the Bible, arguably she has interfered with the spiritual life of any disciple she may have touched as well as any man in the crowd touched by her.

She deserved a searing reprimand and scolding from Jesus.

What she got was health and wholeness. Her bleeding stopped.

She deserved a stern tongue lashing (some men would have beat her like a dog) what she heard was: “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.”

Doctors could not cure her. All the money she had could not cure her. The priests could not cure her.

Only one person in the whole world could give this woman the thing she yearned for. Jesus Christ.

He did not give her pills to take. He did not put her on the cold stainless steel examination table.

He did not do a biopsy. He did not order an MRI. By her touching him, she was healed.

Jarius comes to Jesus and pleads with Jesus to save his daughter. Mark and Luke record that his daughter was near death. Matthew writes that Jarius’ daughter was already dead. It was a hopeless situation that drove Jarius to Jesus. This situation forced Jarius to swallow his pride, as a leader of the synagogue, and approach a man whose ministry and teaching he opposed. Jesus orders the noisy group of people to leave the little girl alone because ‘she is not dead but sleeping.’ And they laughed at him. Jesus went in and took her by the hand and the girl got up. The power of Jesus if we but trust Him.

The young daughter of Jarius was raised from the dead. Hopeless situations were turned into occasions for celebration because Jesus entered the situation and touched lives.

We face hopeless situations; times when we can only look to Jesus—to his love and grace.

There are times when God does not answer our prayers immediately.

It may be helpful to us, when we are in hopeless situations, to have a VCR mentality. One sports addict tapes all the games, but instead of watching them from the beginning, he watches the final score. If his team wins, he rewinds the tape, grabs a bag of popcorn and sits down to enjoy the action. He doesn’t worry if his team gets behind or makes mistakes because he knows that they were victorious in the end. In a similar manner, we can look to the final victory of Jesus

on the cross. We don't need to worry because we know the end of the story. We can rest in the love and grace of Jesus.

Let us take some time to bring the hopeless situations and areas of our lives where we need to be healed to Jesus and ask for his healing touch in our lives.

Amen