

“Follow me,” Jesus tells Matthew. And Matthew follows.

Later, Matthew has thrown a dinner party to introduce Jesus to his friends. Matthew is a tax-collector. This means he is rich and that he's despised by his fellow Jews. For tax-collectors were considered Roman sympathizers who gathered revenue for the empire from their own people in conquered territories. So Matthew was complicit in and benefited from Rome's occupation of Palestine, and his fellow Jews would have hated him for it, even as he seems now to have left it behind.

So Matthew was at the socially margins of society because of the work he did, and his social life reflected it - he found his friends where he was, on the margins. They too were looked down on, excluded from religious life, blamed for propagating the problems plaguing society, denied access to the kinds of privileges the dominant culture enjoyed, and they were called names. One name in particular: “Sinners.”

Some powerful members of that dominant culture, Pharisees, showed up and asked why Jesus was eating with “those people.” Hearing their complaint to the disciples, Jesus tells them “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”

The question that's been guiding my reading this week is this: Who is Jesus calling sick?

I had a conversation with someone a number of weeks ago. He was thinking about joining the church but wanted to check some things out with me first. We had spoken a few times already and seemed to be connecting well. But he was “concerned” about some of the policies of the ELCA - the national church body we belong to - and wanted to know if I agreed with them.

Over the course of our conversation, he explained to me what he wanted in a church. He wanted a place to rest, a place where he could step out of the world and find peace, food for the journey, “sanctuary.” In other words, a protected place where he can grow and thrive without the issues of the world interfering with his relationship with God.

The ELCA as an institution takes into account the society in which it exists, including the events and debates roiling in our culture. You might say it’s “incarnational” that way - that because it’s in a particular time and place, that time and place matter to the “way” it should be in the world. They take seriously that as a Church, it has been called by God to attend to the world around them - called for such a time as this. So they respond through a gospel lens and offer a different way forward - one based in the gospel. In other words, protection and isolation from the world is not what they’re after. Rather, they seek to offer a faithful response to it and in it “as it is”.

But I think this man’s understanding of church is pretty broadly accepted. It’s popular: “There’s no place for those issues in church.” However the ELCA or any other church body understands itself and its role in society, it isn’t necessarily the way its churches understand themselves. Agreed?

For instance, there was a good amount of upset directed at me last week due to something I'd posted on our facebook page and Red Lodge Buzz - a divisive, hot topic issue over which I'd taken a side. Some of that upset was familiar: I've experienced it before after speaking up about similarly "controversial" issues and events in worship. But I realized I had overstepped in a certain way so I apologized for using our social media that way - potentially misrepresenting some of you.

I did not however apologize for stepping into a socially divisive debate as a church leader - I did not apologize for bringing the world into church. Instead, I asked you if you "check" the world at the door when you come to church. I told you that what we do in here matters for what's out there, and that what's out there matters to what we do in here. Because if it doesn't, what the heck **are** we doing?

So the question - just who is Jesus calling sick? There's an obvious answer, that is safe to assume, and there's a less obvious answer we might not like as well. Those referred to as sinners are the obvious choice. But could the sick actually be the folks Jesus is speaking with here? What if he's talking to the social/religious insiders and gently telling them that they are ill? And if that's what he's doing, what exactly are they ill "with," I wonder?

We get two more stories in our gospel reading today - the healing of the woman who suffered with hemorrhages for twelve years, and the raising of the daughter of the synagogue leader. A little background helps us hear these stories with a little more clarity.

Purity codes were a big part of Jewish religious and social life in the first century. They were one way that Jews distinguished themselves as separate from the surrounding Greco-Roman culture. You can read about a lot of these codes in the book of Leviticus (This book takes place in the narrative at Mt. Sinai after the escape from Egypt across the Red Sea). Here, Moses receives the 'law' from God and Hebrew ritual life is encoded. In Leviticus 15 you can read about all kinds of physical discharges that make one "ceremonially unclean" including a discharge of blood that is [a woman's] "regular discharge" after which "she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her [during that time] shall be unclean until the evening (19)." It's generally accepted that this woman's hemorrhages were related to her menstrual cycle.

There were lots of ways to become unclean that are laid out in chapter 5, and many of them having to do with touching something unclean - "When any of you touch any unclean thing - whether the carcass of an unclean beast... unclean livestock or... unclean swarming thing - you shall be guilty. Or when you touch human uncleanness - any uncleanness by which one can become unclean - you shall be guilty (2-3)." Touching a dead human body is certainly included among such things.

And yet, touch is at the center of both these stories. The woman seeks to “touch his cloak” to be made well. And after clearing out the mourners in the little girl’s room, “he went in and took her by the hand.” In both stories, for the woman and for the girl, it is through touch that they are restored to community, to living.

The woman in particular stands out to me. She speaks it plain - she wants to “be made well”. Can you identify? Is there something afflicting you from which you need to be healed? Do we not also need to be made well? I can only speak for myself, but because I’m human I can probably speak for most of us. The answer is YES, isn’t it. I have need of healing, of being made well. I have things that hold me back from the person I want to be, things that keep me locked up in that booth, benefiting from the suffering of others. With the woman suffering hemorrhages (and maybe Matthew, and maybe you), I long to be made well.

This woman “gets” that contact with Jesus will somehow make her well. Think about that. For her to find healing and wholeness, she needs that contact with Jesus. Is this a place for you where you make contact with Jesus? If so, you might say then, that in order to be healed, you need to bring your brokenness in those doors with you. Denying it makes it fester, my friends. Jesus seeks that honesty, that acceptance that we and the world are broken. It’s here that we can look at it honestly in truth, but that means we need to bring it through those doors and sit with it sometimes.

Finally, out she reaches, past all the religious and social barriers that make it “inappropriate” - the crowd around him, their objections to her, and the rules telling her no. And what’s shocking (and good, good news) is that Jesus receives her. “Take heart, daughter,” he says. He calls her kin. He claims her as child of God and beloved. And he does all this before she is healed! Is faith in that claim of God what makes her well? That she can bring it all and still be loved? That sounds like healing to me.

So who is Jesus calling sick? Maybe it’s the ones who check the world (including their need of healing) at the door. Maybe it’s those who divide that world up (sinners on one side and “us” on the other. Church on one side and the world on the other). “I don’t care how they suffer,” we hear these men say, “ - there’s no place for them in church.”

Because these “issues”, divisive or not, are ultimately about people, right? So let’s stop hearing them as “issues” and start hearing them as people - as instances of human suffering due to injustice. I wonder what hearing them in this way might begin stirring in us. I wonder if we might start making room for them in this place.

Are you still with me? We have one thing to look at and be honest about. Hang in there.

Having told the Pharisees that he goes to those who are sick, he continues, “Go and learn what this means, that ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”

The hard truth is that when we leave the conversation about “issues” outside these walls, we are in fact engaged in sacrifice. The sacrifice of marginalized, suffering human beings. We sacrifice them when we take the microphone we have and leave it to the world out there, where the loudest voices are the quickest to pick it up and are always the most hateful. The fact is that as a church, if we’re not speaking up on behalf of the suffering, we are assenting to their suffering and the actions of those who cause it. Silence on the things that matter out there speaks volumes about who we are and who we want to be. That’s not the church Jesus calls us to be in this time and place.

Not being silent might get uncomfortable. It’s a vulnerable, even scary way to be, chancing the odd disagreement, in here and out there. But thank God our relationship in this place is not based on comfort or agreement. Thank God it’s based on divine love that makes us one by the Spirit in the mystical body of Christ. God gives us that unity in order that we might receive each other and the world in the hope and assurance that Jesus is at work with healing in his hands.

AMEN