

Sermon: “The Outstretched Hands of Faith”

“Go and Learn What This Means”

⁹As 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.

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

¹⁸While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." ¹⁹And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. ²⁰Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, ²¹for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." ²²Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. ²³When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, ²⁴he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. ²⁵But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. ²⁶And the report of this spread throughout that district.

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

“The Outstretched Hands of Faith”

I woke up the other morning and looked out the window as the sun rose over the hills by my house. The scene was beautiful, as it so often is during these early summer months—birds were chirping and singing their soft morning songs. Rabbits scurried about. Cows lay quietly in the distance. A mist filled the air, floating up between the trees and across the yard. Everything seemed calm and at peace in the coolness of morning.

I made some coffee and dressed to go outside. Within minutes, however, my eyes started burning with a strange sensation and my head began to hurt. I found myself coughing and the sky around me turning what I thought was a beautiful dawn light into a foreboding orange haze. I realized with horror that this was no morning mist and no normal light. I ran inside and shut the door. I could still hear birds chirping—but their song took on an entirely different key as I realized they were engulfed in toxic smoke.

Safe Inside

Like you, I have sat inside my home this week with the doors and windows shut as smoke from the Canadian wildfires has enveloped our town. According to reports, the air quality in some areas was the worst level ever recorded. A combination of high temperatures and drought makes this year’s fire season exceedingly worse than normal, with millions of acres burning. The impact is being felt thousands of miles away.

Looking out the window this week has been frightening and sobering. I was safe inside, but it was not only the birds and the animals who were in danger. I thought of people in our community who may not have a home to go into, I thought of those whose jobs required them to be outside, or whose medical condition made them especially sensitive to the smoke. In the midst of such an event, the need for care and shelter becomes an urgent issue for many families. It makes our reading this morning about the healing ministry of Jesus take on new meaning.

The news this week is a troubling foretaste of what we know is going to be happening more and more in the years to come. Our beloved Earth is sick and in desperate need of healing. Surrounded by toxic smoke and with nowhere to turn, we may find ourselves beginning to more seriously consider the period of ecological crisis we are entering and how it will begin to manifest in our lives.

The figure of the woman with outstretched hands in our reading this week is striking. For twelve years she had been suffering a medical condition that caused her to be shunned by her community. She had no place of safety or care to turn to. She was reaching out to Jesus as he passed, seeking healing and relief. How many outstretched hands there are in our world today! We are, in so many ways, a wounded world in need of healing.

But the image of ‘outstretched hands’ goes both ways. The outstretched hands of Jesus, calling to Matthew to come join him for dinner, passing food around a humble table of social outcasts, reaching out to touch the girl who had died—*these* outstretched hands are the other side of the story. With his hands, Jesus is pointing to the injustice of a community that relegates some to live on the *outside*—of protection, of safety, of shelter. And we should consider how this dual image of the outstretched hands of faith has implications in our own lives, especially in the times we are living.

Situations like the smoke this week are *not* isolated incidents. There are places in our country and in our world that are going to endure significant disruption in the years ahead, far more than what we experienced this week. Perhaps you have already begun noticing families arriving in our area from other parts of the country, from places like California and elsewhere, looking to escape droughts and wildfires that make their regions no longer livable. There will certainly be more on their way to this region in the years ahead, with its important sources of water and fertile soil. When they arrive, what will they find? Will they find housing and jobs, friendly faces and an invitation to join in our communal life? Or will they struggle to find a place to belong, a way to contribute, and to access basic needs? Will they be allowed to live and work, or will they be denied documents and the status to do so?

This is happening, not only here but globally. The United Nations estimates that there could be up to 200 million climate refugees within the next few decades—families moving to places with water and healthy conditions for food and shelter, leaving places that have become unstable and conflict-ridden. We know within our own community there are families that have already made that terrifying and courageous journey, and we know the heroes they are for what they have done for their family, to give them the life they deserve.

Radical Hospitality

Let us consider then the crucial question that is increasingly upon us: *How will we prepare ourselves to respond in this time?* Here in our community, our church, our country—how will we respond to the mass migration of people in the decades ahead seeking new homes and new lives, here and around the world? Will we erect walls and fight to keep people out, or will we organize ourselves into places of *structural welcome* and embrace? May we have ears to hear this!

It may sound stark, but it will increasingly come down to this: *A choice between radical hospitality or ecological apartheid.* Unless we intentionally organize in the years ahead to be communities of welcome, we are most likely to organize instead the opposite: systems of separation that leave some people in safety, on the inside, and others outside, amidst the smoke. The words of Jesus with outstretched hands, demanding justice for the excluded and vulnerable should be ringing fiercely in our ears.

I know that this church is already comprised of many who hear these words. Our individual acts of generosity and mercy will be crucial witnesses to what must be done. And we know they are not enough on their own. We need to begin organizing at the social and political level to become places of *structural welcome*. We need to be thinking about community infrastructure—housing, employment, cooperative living, complementary currencies, and social businesses. These are large endeavors, and we have precious little time to prepare.

In the absence of preparation, we know too well from recent years the xenophobia, nationalism, and racism that lies within our culture and our world. Our default response is more likely to be about policing borders than welcoming strangers. Without truly beginning to prepare at the *cultural level*, we will not succeed in preventing suffering or avoiding conflict. Fortunately, themes of hospitality and welcome are at the very core of the Biblical message, and widespread throughout the scriptures of the world religions. Harnessing the spiritual dimension of these themes will be crucial to the cultural work we must do to prepare our world for the time to come.

However, while themes of justice and mercy are central to Jesus' message, we seem at times to deflect away from his social critique to the level of personal morality. *This is a mistake.* If we equate Jesus' message solely with issues of morality and personal salvation, we have closed our eyes and ears to the message Jesus repeats over and over again. It is a *political* message—a core alignment of God's focus on issues of economic justice, political oppression, and social equity. If we don't understand and address the *structural* nature of sin and suffering in our world we do not understand the true gospel vision Jesus was proclaiming.

Sinners as Outsiders

Consider our reading this morning. In Matthew 9, we witness Jesus intentionally disrupting the social boundaries of his community. He dines with "tax collectors and sinners", has contact with the woman suffering from hemorrhagic bleeding, and touches the girl who has died. All three of these are actions that would by the standards of his community make him impure. He would be expected to shun these people, or risk being contaminated with their sin. When asked, Jesus says "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

I desire mercy, not sacrifice. Jesus is quoting from the prophet Hosea and lifting up a central theme of God's revelation—an overturning of the unjust power relations that characterize so much of human history. He is aiming directly at the way in which religion is so often used to support these unjust power relations and proclaiming that God wants nothing to do with these

empty gestures of burnt offerings and clangor symbols. *What God wants is justice for the poor, protection for the vulnerable, mercy for the outcast.* ‘Go and learn what this means’, he proclaims.

But what does Jesus mean by this word ‘sinner’? Who is he talking about? It occurs multiple times in this passage. Matthew 9 says that “many tax collectors and sinners” came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. The Pharisees then inquire, using the same phrase—“why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners”.

Our default cultural reading is to interpret the word “sinner” to mean a person who is engaged in *immoral* behavior. We think of people who do bad things and hurt people. But when we read that Jesus was having dinner with “tax collectors and sinners”, this is not the point that is being made. In the context of Jesus’ community, the “sinners” he was dining with were not the immoral but the *outcasts* of society, those living *outside* the law—strangers, foreigners, the sick and lame, people who were not welcome, who were shunned, who were kept outside the protection of communal life. Their status meant that they did not keep temple rituals, which then became the perverse justification for their condemnation. They ate unclean food and did not offer the proper tithes to the religious authorities.

What’s important about this is that we read this passage and understand that the “sinners” Jesus was eating with were not immoral people but rather people who were unfairly shut out of the protection of their surrounding community, living on the margins, surviving by doing things others would not. Jesus’ focus was here, on this issue, overturning these oppressive structures and healing those who were wounded by them—lifting up the vision of the Kingdom of God as a place where there are no outcasts, where all are welcome, and where all can receive mercy and care and rest and belonging.

We must hear Jesus’ message as one of overturning social inequities. With outstretched hands, Jesus is responding to the outstretched hands of a wounded world, and the good news he was proclaiming was of the possibility for healing, justice, and restoration. When we ignore this dimension and focus our interpretation of sin as immorality requiring a

sacrifice to satisfy God's wrath, we are flattening the central message of Jesus, *which was to overturn this very idea*. Jesus saw sin as a *woundedness* in the human condition, a woundedness that separated people from wholeness, from intimacy, from love—from the Spirit of God that unites and connects all things. Redemption is not about being spared from punishment, redemption is about the healing process that brings about inter-personal, social, and spiritual restoration. We should not deny the inner transformation Jesus call us to, but we should understand the central meaning of this transformation as the healing of our wounds necessary to stop the cycle of harm. This is how we need to read the Gospel and understand its implications for us today.

Healing Redemption

In his book *The Wounded Heart of God* the Korean-American theologian Andrew Sung Park says “there is a fundamental problem in the Christian way of thinking about sin: it has been oriented almost exclusively to sinners.” “Christianity has been preoccupied,” he says, with sinners and oppressors but “has devoted little attention to their victims.” While it has “delineated a complete map” for the salvation of the wrong-doer, it has devoted “little or no theological analysis to the oppressed...The latter have been regarded simply as recipients of pity, compassion, and mercy.” As a result, he concludes: “The present form of the doctrine of sin is inadequate to diagnose and address the world’s problems.”

To rectify this, Park introduces a traditional Korean concept of ‘han’ as being a necessary complement to our understanding of sin. ‘Han’ refers to the despair and hopelessness that can overwhelm those who face oppression or wrong-doing. Park believes that we need to see ‘sin’ and ‘han’ as twin sides of the human condition. When people fall into despair as a result of their situation, this can then manifest in negative ways. They can often then become oppressors themselves, acting in ways that wound others. There is a reciprocal relationship between ‘sin’ and ‘han’, between wrong-doing and being-harmed. We all know the phrase—“hurt people hurt people”—and this is a more profound spiritual truth than we realize.

This lens is important because it helps us to recover the power of Jesus’ message—which was not focused solely on the forgiveness of the wrong-

doer but *also* on the healing of the one who is wounded by them, knowing that many wrong-doers are also enmeshed in their own woundedness. To get out of the tangle of harm, the healing presence of divine grace is able to cut the knot, to heal the wounds—to welcome the excluded and restore the social order that has been perverted into injustice and oppression. This is the good news of the gospel and it begins with the breaking down of the walls that people erect to keep certain people out, separated from grace and hospitality. In the context of what we are facing, this is a message we must hear anew in our time.

When we look across the generations of human history, we see patterns of exclusion and oppression that manifest along various dimensions—gender, race, ethnicity and religion being some of the most prominent. The injustice of these patterns is matched only by the horror that comes from the war and conflict that arises in their wake, as ‘sin’ and ‘han’ blend together into mutual enmity and misery. This is the situation that humanity finds itself in and this is the situation that Jesus’ message of justice and radical hospitality is most directly pointing to.

These issues are upon us now and will become even more acute in the years ahead. When food and water systems become disrupted, when power grids fail, or oppressive heat or wildfire strikes, will we each retreat into the safety of our homes and leave others to live in temporary shelters in open spaces? Will we vote to build walls or open borders? We must prepare ourselves for the task of becoming communities of justice, of mercy, of structural welcome.

Now is the Time

Last time we were together, we spoke about what it means to have ‘eyes to see and ears to hear’. May our experience this week be a wakeup call that *now is the time*. We must see what is happening in our world and anticipate the challenges ahead. It is time to get involved in what it means to make the Kingdom of Heaven manifest here in our world, in our time. It is a place where all are invited to belong and to participate in the life of community. We must go forth with the outstretched hands of faith, knowing that we may find ourselves in situations in the future in which these hands may be outstretched to *receive* as well as to give. Either way, our prayer is that they

would find a pair of hands meeting them on the other side. “*Go and learn this,*” Jesus says: ‘*I desire mercy. I have come for those who are wounded and need healing. Follow me. You are invited to join in the healing redemption of the world.*’

This is the message. This is the call. Let us learn to follow this way, the way of Jesus. Let us practice the faith of outstretched hands—offering mercy and finding it, for ourselves and for all.

Lord, hear our prayer.