

OPENING LINE:

The Spirit helps us in our weakness, interceding with sighs too deep for words.

Sermon: Touched

Scripture: Matthew 9:9-13; 18-26

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. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with the disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to the 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, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.".... While 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." And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." And instantly the woman was made well.

When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district. THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD

There was never a more unlikely candidate for the office of apostle than Matthew. Matthew was what the people called a "Publican", they were tax gatherers, and were so called because they dealt with public money and public funds.

The problem for the Roman government was how to devise a system whereby the taxes could be collected as efficiently and as cheaply as possible. They did so by auctioning the right to collect taxes in a certain area. The man who bought that right was responsible to the Roman government for an agreed sum; anything he could raise over and above that, he was allowed to keep as commission.

Obviously, this system lent itself to grave abuses. People did not really know how much they ought to pay in those days before newspapers, radio, and television, nor had they any right to appeal against the tax-collector. The consequence was that many tax-collectors became wealthy through illegal extortion. This system had led to so many abuses that in Palestine it had been brought to an end before the time of Jesus; but taxes still had to be paid, and there were still abuses.

Although the old method of auctioning the taxes had been stopped, all kinds of people were needed to collect these taxes. The people who collected them were drawn from the Provincials (City leaders) themselves. Often they were volunteers, and it was not difficult for such a person to line his own pockets in addition to collecting the taxes which were legally due.

These tax-gathers were universally hated. They were notoriously dishonest. What roused the Jews more than anything else was their religious conviction that God alone was king, and that to pay taxes to any mortal ruler was an infringement of God's rights. By Jewish law, a tax-gatherer was debarred from the synagogue; he was included with things and animals unclean.

When Jesus called Matthew, he called a man whom everyone hated.

Here is one of the greatest instances in the New Testament of Jesus' power to see in a man not only what he was, but also what he could be. No one ever had such faith in the possibilities of human nature as Jesus had.

It is not to be thought that Matthew had never seen Jesus before. No doubt Matthew had heard about this young Galilean who came with a message breathtakingly new, who spoke with an authority the like of which no one had ever heard before, and who numbered among his friends men and women from whom the orthodox good people of the day shrank in loathing. No doubt Matthew had listened on the outskirts of the crowd and had felt his heart stir within him. So, he found Jesus standing before him; he heard Jesus issue his challenge; and Matthew accepted that challenge and rose up and left all and followed him. We must note what Matthew lost and what Matthew found. He lost a comfortable job but found destiny. He lost a good income but found honor. He lost a comfortable security but found an adventure of the like of which he had never dreamed.

It may be that if we accept the challenge of Christ, we shall find ourselves poorer in material things. It may be that the worldly ambitions will have to go. But beyond doubt we will find a peace and joy and a thrill in life that we never knew before. In Jesus Christ, we will find a wealth surpassing anything we may have to abandon for the sake of Christ. When Matthew left the tax-collector's table that day, he gave up much in the material sense, but in the spiritual sense he became an heir to a fortune.

Jesus did not only call Matthew to follow him and be his disciple; he actually sat at table with men and women like Matthew, with tax-gatherers and sinners. Jesus said, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." It may well be that Jesus is saying, "When you make a feast, you invite the coldly orthodox and the piously self-righteous, when I make a feast, I invite those who are most conscious of their sin and those whose need of God is greatest.

In Palestine people were divided into two sections. There were the orthodox who rigidly kept the law in every small detail, and there was those who did not keep its minor regulations. Those were classed as "people of the land", and it was forbidden to the orthodox to go on a journey with them, to do any business with them, to give anything to them or to receive anything from them, to entertain them as guest or to be guest in their houses. By keeping company with people like this, Jesus was doing something which the pious people of his day would never have done.

Jesus' defense was perfectly simple, he merely said that he went where the need was greatest. It would be a poor doctor who visited only houses where people enjoyed health. The doctor's place is where people are ill, it is a doctor's glory and task to go to those who need healing. Whatever I may wish to do, I must stay where men need me most. It was sinners who needed Jesus, and among sinners he would move.

When Jesus said, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners," we understand what he was saying. He was not saying that there were some people who were so good that they had no need of anything which he could give, still less was he saying that he was not interested in people who were good. Jesus was saying, "I did not come to invite people who are so self-satisfied that they are convinced they do not need anyone's help; I came to invite people who are very conscious of their sin and desperately aware of their need for a savior." He was saying, "It is only those who know how much they need me who can accept my invitation.

The scribes and Pharisees were more concerned with the preservation of their own holiness than with the helping of another's sin. They were like doctors who refused to visit the sick in case they themselves became infected. They were more concerned with criticism than with encouragement. They were far more concerned to point out the faults of other people than to help them conquer these faults.

We must look at passages 9:18-26 as a whole, for in it is something wonderful. It has two miracle stories in it, healing the ruler's daughter, and the healing of the hemorrhaging woman.

Beyond a doubt, the ruler came to Jesus when everything else had failed. He was, a ruler of the synagogue, that is to say, he was a pillar of Jewish orthodoxy. He was one of the men who despised and hated Jesus, and who would have been glad to see him eliminated. No doubt he tried every kind of doctor, and every kind of cure, and only in sheer desperation, and as a last resort, did he come to Jesus at all. His daughter was the most valuable she would ever be at the age of twelve. That is to say, the ruler came to Jesus from a very inadequate motive. He did not come to Jesus as a result of an outflow of the love of his heart, he came to Jesus because he had tried everything and everyone else, and because there was nowhere else to go. This man came to Jesus simply because desperation drove him there.

The woman suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years crept up behind Jesus in the crowd and touched the hem of his cloak. We could say that she showed nothing other than superstition. To touch the edge of Jesus' cloak is the same kind of thing as to look for healing power in the relics and the handkerchiefs of saints.

This woman came to Jesus with what we would call a very inadequate faith. She came with what seems much more like superstition than faith.

And yet they found his love and power waiting for their needs. Here is a tremendous thing. It does not matter how we come to Christ, if only we come. No matter how inadequately and how imperfectly we come, his love and his arms are open to receive us.

There is a double lesson here. It means that we do not wait to ask Christ's help until our motives, our faith, and our theology are perfect, we may come to him exactly as we are. And it means that we have no right to criticize others whose motives are suspect, whose faith we question and whose theology we believe to be mistaken. It is not how we come to Christ that matters, it is that we should come at all, for he is willing to accept us as we are, and able to make us what we ought to be.

Matthew tells this story much more briefly than the other gospel writers do. There is much more detail of this story in Mark 5:21-43 and in Luke 8:40-56. There we discover that the ruler's name is Jarius, and that he was a ruler of the synagogue. The ruler of the synagogue was a very important person.

He was elected among the elders. He was not a teaching or a preaching official, he appointed those who were to read and to pray in the service and invited those who were to preach. It was his duty to see that nothing unfitting took place within the synagogue, and the care of the synagogue building was in his oversight. The whole practical administration of the synagogue was in his hands.

It is clear that such a man would come to Jesus only as a last resort. He would be one of those strict orthodox Jews who regarded Jesus as a dangerous heretic, and it was only when everything else had failed that he turned in desperation to Jesus. Jesus might well have said to him, "When things were going well with you, you wanted to kill me, now that things are going badly, you are appealing for my help."

And Jesus might well have refused help to a man who came like that. But he bore no grudges, here was a man who needed him, and Jesus' one desire was to help. Injured pride and the unforgiving spirit had no part in the mind of Jesus.

So, Jesus went with the ruler of the synagogue to his house, and there he found a scene of pandemonium. The Jews set very high the mourning over the dead. There was rending of garments, (Tearing). There was wailing for the dead. In a house of grief, an incessant wailing was kept up. The wailing was done by professional wailing women. There were the flute players. The music of the flute was especially associated with death. Even the poorest among Israelites were not allowed less than two flutes and one wailing woman.

We can then picture the scene in the house of the ruler of the synagogue. The garments were being torn, the wailing women were uttering their shrieks in an abandonment of synthetic grief, the flutes were shrilling their eerie sound. In that house, there was all the pandemonium of middle eastern grief.

Into that excited and hysterical atmosphere came Jesus. Authoritatively he sent them all out. Quietly he told them that the girl was not dead but only asleep, and they laughed at him. It is a strangely human touch, this. The mourners were so luxuriating in their grief that they even resented "Hope". Burial in the middle east follows death very quickly, because the climate makes it necessary.

Interments always take place at the latest on the evening of the day of death, and frequently at night, if the deceased lived till after sunset.

With the hemorrhaging woman, from the Jewish point of view, this woman could not have suffered from any more terrible or humiliating disease. When Mark tells this story, he makes it clear that this woman had tried everything, and had gone to every available doctor, and was worse instead of better. (Mark 5:26). The horror of the disease was that it rendered the sufferer unclean. The law laid down; “If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, for all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness. Every bed on which she lies during all the days of her discharge, shall be treated as unclean, everything on which she sits shall be unclean. Whoever touches these things shall be unclean and shall remain unclean till determined clean by a priest. That is to say, a woman with a issue of blood was unclean, everything and everyone she touched was infected with that uncleanness. She was absolutely shut off from worship of God and from the fellowship of other men and women. She should not even have been in the crowd surrounding Jesus, for, if they had known, she was infecting with her uncleanness everyone whom she touched. There is little wonder that she was desperately eager to try anything which might rescue her from her life of isolation and humiliation. So, she slipped up behind Jesus and touched the hem of his garment. When she touched it, it was as if time stood still. The extraordinary and movingly beautiful thing about this scene is that all at once in the middle of the crowd Jesus halted. And for the moment it seemed that for him no one but that woman and nothing but her existed. She was not simply a poor woman lost in a crowd; she was someone to whom Jesus gave the whole of himself. For Jesus, no one is ever lost in a crowd, because Jesus is like God. To God, one person is never like another, each person is his individual child, and each of us has all God’s love and all God’s power at our disposal. To Jesus, this woman was not lost in the crowd, in her hour of need, to him she was all that mattered. Jesus is like that for every one of us.

LET ME TELL YOU A STORY:

In “A Night to Remember” by Walter Lord, he details the story of the sinking of the Titanic in April 1912. There was an appalling loss of life when that new and supposedly unsinkable liner hit an iceberg in the middle of the Atlantic. After the tragedy had been announced, the New York newspaper “The American” featured a leading article devoted entirely to the death of “John Jacob Astor”, the millionaire, and at the end of the leader in the paper, almost casually, it was mentioned that 1,800 others also were lost. The only one who really mattered, the only one of real news value, was the millionaire. The other losses were of no real importance. Men and women can be like that, but God can never be like that.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Keep us faithful in your service until Christ comes in final victory and we shall feast with all your saints in the joy of your eternal realm. Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor are yours, almighty God, now and forever. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

Moreover, the healing touch of Jesus raises questions about what healing is and how healing takes place. Can Jesus heal like this today? Can he raise the dead? Healing may be physical, but it is also relational and social, restoring the marginalized into community, where they can be lovingly touched again. Nothing can replace a restorative healing touch to those who need to know they are not alone, even in death. What kind of God will go all the way to touch death in order to destroy it for us? A God whose ministry is one of mercy.