

Outcasts Among Us

Matthew 9:9-13

June 8, 2008

I.

Imagine, just hypothetically, a few days from now Jesus is driving down the interstate and comes to a toll booth. And instead of paying his toll he tells the person collecting tolls, "Get in, follow me."

And assume that the person does it. Suppose, he or she just walks out of the toll booth, leaves all the money, all the records, gets in Jesus' car, and they drive away. What would you think if you were in the next car in line? That might be one of the strangest things you had seen in a long time. And maybe you would be critical of the toll collector. "That person should be fired," you might think.

Interesting scenario, isn't it? And yet, that's what happened in today's Gospel. Let's look at the story again, from a different perspective. Suppose someone made a documentary movie about this event set in biblical times. Let's be film makers and imagine how it might begin.

We might see the blurred image of an open hand as it comes into focus. In it rests a Roman coin. The camera pulls back. A man is sitting in a makeshift booth beside a dusty road. His face shows sadness and regret. He is despised. His work has made him an outcast among his own people. Two boys throw rocks at the booth and run. A subtitle, "*Capernaum, A.D. 30,*" appears briefly at the bottom of the screen.

But even though this man is troubled, a curious hope flickers in his heart. For he has heard of the teacher, Jesus, and his miracles. Suddenly, from the left of the screen a man appears. It is Jesus! Others are with him. "Follow me," he says, and without a word the command is obeyed. The man throws the coin aside. It no longer is important. But the camera zooms in on it as it tumbles, in slow motion, into the dust.

This story resembles a Hitchcock script, doesn't it. Dialogue is abbreviated; settings suddenly shift. So let's go back to the movie. Now the camera cuts to the crowded courtyard of a fashionable home. Dinner is underway. Music and conversation fill the air.

But what's this? The unhappy man in the booth now is the host. It's his house. His face is peaceful. And Jesus is the guest of honor. Some of the host's friends, also outcasts and despised in the community, are sitting with them. Other questionable characters are there as well.

The camera pulls back. Stern-looking men in elaborate robes are standing outside, watching. Pharisees! They have challenged Jesus before. Their leader speaks accusingly to one of Jesus' friends. "Why is he eating with tax collectors and sinners?" Everything stops. Total silence. Jesus has overheard.

Jesus slowly rises to address his critic; irony in his voice. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor," he says, "but the sick. Go and learn what this means. 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" He continues, "For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." There is no reply. The screen fades to black.

II.

By now we probably have the big picture, don't we? But let me fill in some of the blanks. Part of this story is about the calling of Matthew to be a disciple. Matthew, the author of the first book of the New Testament, was a tax collector. He was writing about himself. A sort of autobiography or self-portrait, so to speak.

And tax collectors were despised among the Jews, even they also were Jews, because they worked for the Romans who ruled the area. The Romans hired Jews to collect taxes from their fellow Jews, but here's the catch. The Romans didn't pay them anything. Tax collectors were left to collect their salaries along with the taxes. They could keep anything they received on top of the regular taxes. It was a form of extortion. People had to pay more than they actually owed.

So, Matthew was an outcast, and he probably was pretty well off. He was able to host a large dinner party for Jesus and those traveling with him. And he probably already was aware of Jesus' ministry and miracles even before all this took place. His conversion that day to be a disciple likely occurred because he already was dissatisfied with his life.

And Matthew had invited whatever friends he had to come to dinner. But since he had no friends among the more upstanding part of the community, his friends were tax collectors like himself, or other sinners. The term "tax collectors and sinners" appears eight times in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and always in the context of disreputable people.

In addition, Pharisees were watching the proceedings. Pharisees, as we remember, were Jewish religious leaders who strictly followed the Jewish law and traditions, and regularly confronted Jesus about how his teachings disregarded both. Certainly, socializing with tax collectors and sinners was not approved by the Pharisees. They were too self-righteous to associate with people like that.

III.

With that background, let's look at two questions. The first is why Jesus even was in that house at all. This leads to the second question; the meaning of what Jesus said to the Pharisees.

We really don't know why Jesus was in Matthew's house. The reading doesn't say. We went directly from the toll booth to the dinner table. And by all community standards, Jesus' presence would seem to be scandalous. Sharing a meal was a sign of intimacy in first century Palestine, and for Jesus to be with people who were shunned and avoided in their own community might seem almost as bad as being one of them. After all, there's an old saying that if you lie down with dogs, you get fleas.

But Jesus did not believe that, did he? He was not so self-righteous that he avoided people who were on the shady side of things. There's another old saying that a light may shine on a cesspool without harming the light.

That's what Jesus was doing. He was shining the light of his teachings on people who needed it. And his ministry was not something that he did at a distance. He could not say, "I want you to change your ways, but I will not associate with you." That would not have worked.

Throughout the Gospels we see where Jesus reached out to unsavory people. He touched lepers, he revealed himself to people even his disciples avoided, and he healed people who were not believers.

So, we should not be surprised that Jesus was dining with tax collectors and sinners. And his response to the Pharisees gives us a further explanation because it also gets to the second question. Jesus said that "those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." Then he said, "I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners."

Again, as he did so often, Jesus used symbolism. Here, health and righteousness signified spiritual wholeness, and sickness was a metaphor for sin. And it's important to understand that Jesus was not being critical of righteous people, or of those who did not need a physician, so to speak. Certainly, righteous people still need Jesus, and they should give thanks for God's

grace in their lives. Many times in the Gospels Jesus blessed those who lived according to his teachings (Mt. 5:3-11, Lk. 11:28, Jn. 13:17).

But in today's reading his focus was on those whom he called to leave their old lives and enter into new lives. By his presence at that dinner in Matthew's house he was throwing a lifeline to people standing on the edge of the cliff. He was offering spiritual health to those in danger of spiritual death. And by excluding the righteous Jesus was not denying their spiritual health. Rather he was demonstrating how it was equally available to the unrighteous.

IV.

This is a good story. But what does it mean for us today? What if we had a sign in front of the church that said "Righteous welcome. Sinners keep out!" That certainly would not be consistent with today's Gospel, would it? It would be contrary to what we believe about Christianity.

But what if the sign was just the opposite? What if it said, "Sinners welcome. Righteous come back later." Now, that might sound more like Jesus' message today, wouldn't it? After all, he said he came to call sinners, not the righteous. But that would be a one-sided understanding.

This question reminds me of the story about a Baptist preacher who was trying to get a fellow to start coming to church. The man said he didn't really have the right clothes, and so the preacher went out and got him a new suit. Still the fellow did not show up, and so the preacher asked him about it. The fellow said, "Well, after I got dressed up, I thought I looked so good I went to the Episcopal Church."

Is that our image? Do people only come if they have the right clothes? I hope not. I hope we don't think that we can set the standards for who is acceptable to God. If we do that, we are merely modern-day Pharisees ourselves. And I don't believe we do that here. I believe we see the church as a way to include others, not just select others. The sign in front of the church would invite everyone.

But it's not always easy, and it might not come naturally. We tell our children not to talk to strangers. We have stereotypes of gangsters and terrorists. Even Jesus might look suspicious today walking through an airport. Associating with people like ourselves is easy. Even the Pharisees did that. Reaching out to others on the margins of life can be more difficult.

But Jesus reached out to tax collectors and sinners, and he teaches us to do the same. We might call them by different names now. Instead of tax collectors and sinners today's outcasts could be the homeless and needy, AIDS victims, people with addictions, and those without hope. They would be included among today's dinner partners with Jesus.

V.

Several years ago a Christian evangelist, David Wilkerson, wrote *The Cross and the Switchblade*. It was a gripping story about a young gang member in New York City whose life was dramatically transformed by Christ. If you have read that book you know why Jesus dined with sinners. Christ's love prevailed over the mean streets.

As tempting as it might be, Jesus does not call us to remain comfortably settled here in the church, ministering only to those who come through the door. Again, the Pharisees did that. As the church, we are called to reach out to everyone, including the outcasts and the scorned, the derelicts and the deserted.

And in doing so, we will be enriched and blessed. Of course, we will not reach everyone. Some will persist in sin. But those we help will have a chance to see the other side of eternity, and we will be better off on this side of eternity for doing it. *Amen.*