

Medicine For The Soul

Matthew 9:9-13

June 17, 2012

I.

I am going ask you to join with me in picturing our Gospel reading in our minds. We use this approach to studying the Bible during the second week of our 40 Days in the Word Course. Imagine a car is driving down the highway and comes to a toll booth. And instead of paying the toll the driver 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, leaves all the records, gets in the car, and they just drive away. The drivers behind start honking their horns. There is no one to collect the tolls.

What would you think about that? It might be one of the strangest things you had seen in a long time. And perhaps you would be critical of the toll collector for just walking off the job. "That person should be fired," you might think.

Interesting scenario, isn't it? And yet, that's what happened in today's Gospel. And now, let's picture it again from a different perspective. Suppose someone made a documentary movie about this story for the History Channel. Let's all be film makers and imagine how it might begin.

We might see the blurred image of an open hand as it comes into focus. It holds a Roman coin. The camera pulls back. The man with the coin is sitting in a makeshift booth beside a dusty road. His face shows sadness and regret.

Then a subtitle, "*Capernaum, A.D. 30,*" briefly appears at the bottom of the screen, and the narrator tells us the man is a tax collector and his job has made him an outcast among his own people. Two boys crawl up from behind, throw rocks at him, and run.

The narrator continues. Even though this deplorable man is troubled and unhappy, a curious hope flickers in his heart. For he has heard about the teacher, Jesus, and his miracles. He wonders if there could be redemption for his miserable life.

Suddenly, a man appears on the road. It's Jesus! Others are with him. He approaches the tax collector and says, "Follow me." 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, end over end, into the dust.

This story is like a Hitchcock script, isn't it. Dialogue is abbreviated; settings suddenly shift. But the movie isn't over yet. Let's go back to it. Now the camera cuts to the crowded courtyard of a fashionable home. Dinner is underway. Music and conversation fill the evening 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, along with other questionable characters.

Then the camera pulls back. Stern-looking men with long beards and elaborate robes are standing just outside, ominously 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." He continues, "For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." There is no reply. The screen fades to black.

II.

This is the big picture, but let me fill in some blanks. Part of this story describes the calling of Matthew to be a disciple. Matthew, author of the first book in the New Testament, was the tax collector in this story. Mark and Luke also included his story in their Gospels.

And tax collectors were especially despised. That's because the Romans hired Jews to collect taxes from their fellow Jews, but here's the catch. The Romans didn't pay them anything, but allowed them to collect money for themselves along with the taxes, and to keep the excess. Many did quite well. It was a form of extortion. People had to pay the collector and the Romans.

So, Matthew was an outcast, and probably was one of those who prospered. He was able to host a large dinner party for Jesus. But since he had no friends among the more respectable part of the community, his friends likely were tax collectors like himself, or other sinners. The term "tax collectors and sinners" frequently is used in the Gospels in a negative sense.

In addition, Pharisees were watching. And 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 do that.

III.

With that background, let's look at two issues. The first is the significance of Jesus even being in Matthew's house. This leads to a second question; the meaning of what he said to the Pharisees.

And we don't know why Jesus was there. The reading went directly from the dusty road to the dinner table with no explanation. And many people, even apart from the Pharisees, might have considered Jesus' presence to be scandalous.

After all, sharing a meal was a sign of friendship in first century Palestine. 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. There's an old saying that if you lie down with dogs, you get fleas.

But Jesus did not believe that. He did not avoid people who were on the shady side of things. There's another old saying that a light may shine in a sewer without polluting the light.

That's what Jesus was doing in this reading. He was shining the light of his teachings on people who needed to change their lives. He did that frequently in the Gospels. And his ministry required him to be present; not at a distance. He could not say, "I want you to change your ways, but I won't associate with you." That would not have been effective.

So, we should not be surprised that Jesus was dining with tax collectors and sinners. And to use an old saying, the picture of Jesus doing that might be worth a thousand words. In our minds we can see him associating with sinners in the home of a sinner. It sends a message of hope and assurance that redemption is possible.

And then his encounter with the Pharisees leads to the second question. We recall that he said, "those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick," and that, "I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners."

Again, as he did so often, Jesus was using symbolism. Health signified righteousness, and sickness was a metaphor for sin. And it's important to understand that Jesus was not distancing himself from righteous people. His focus today, however, was on calling sinners to leave their old lives and be transformed into the model of his teachings.

The same idea is in Luke's Gospel where Jesus said, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (15:7). That's what Jesus was doing in Matthew's house. He was throwing a lifeline to people standing on the edge of the pit. He offered spiritual health to those who were spiritually ill.

IV.

This is a good story. But what does it mean for us today? Certainly we would not put a sign on our board out front that said "Righteous Welcome. Sinners Keep Out!" That would be contrary to what we believe about Christianity.

But such things can happen in other ways. The church at large can tend to define the terms on which people can relate to God. And if people agree with those terms they may become members. Some say our own definition of "confirmed communicant in good standing" could be misused in that way. Other denominations have similar requirements for participation.

And that was how the Pharisees operated two thousand years ago. They took it upon themselves to define who was righteous and who was not. Jesus, however, had different ideas in today's Gospel. He invited all to believe, no matter their backgrounds.

This reminds me of the Baptist preacher who was trying to get a fellow to come to church. The man said he didn't have the right clothes, and so the preacher bought a new suit for him. But the fellow still did not show up, and so the preacher called and asked 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 don't think so. I am confident we don't think that we can set the standards for who is acceptable to God. The most important thing we do here happens on Sunday morning when we worship the Lord, and our first priority is to bring people to the Lord in spirit and truth.

And we should note that although Jesus frequently extended himself to the homeless and the needy in the Bible, today's short Gospel is not about the homeless and needy in an economic sense, but rather those who are spiritually homeless and needy.

Jesus contrasted those who are well with those who are sick, and he was describing spiritual health. He contrasted the righteous with sinners, and this presented the picture of those who did, and those who did not do, God's will.

V.

And so while we always should have a social ministry here at St. Thomas, today's Gospel calls us to be Christian witnesses in the community. Jesus does not want us just to remain in the church, ministering only to those who come through the doors on their own. Even Pharisees did that.

Jesus instead enjoins us, through the church, to reach out to modern-day tax collectors and sinners; to those who don't know the Lord, or who once did but have forgotten; to those who would not be here in church except for us and the initiatives we take to invite them.

And in doing so, we will be enriched and blessed. Of course, we will not reach everyone. Some will remain apart from the Lord. 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.*