

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

The Text: Matthew 9:9-13

No one likes to be an outsider. To be excluded. To be told “you don’t belong.” To have the door shut in your face or simply to be shunned, left alone, isolated. Have you ever been on the outside? Perhaps wanting to enter but being afraid you wouldn’t be accepted so you didn’t even try? Do you realise that there are people who are honestly afraid to walk into a church on a Sunday morning? They are afraid of being recognized as “outsiders,” as people who don’t belong in a place like this. “Unreligious people.”

I recall one man saying to me, “the church roof would cave in if I showed up here on a Sunday morning”. He was joking, but completely serious. He was convinced he didn’t belong in religious circles. There’s a famous picture of two cowboys on horseback peering through the window of a crowded church. Inside the people are singing a hymn. One of the men on the outside is singing too, while the other is leaning forward, listening attentively.

I wonder - what keeps them on the outside? Why don’t they get off their horses and join the people inside the church? Perhaps they aren’t dressed properly, or they haven’t had a bath in a while. More likely they aren’t comfortable in the polite society of the church and are much more comfortable worshipping on horseback. They are outsiders.

Matthew the tax-collector was an outsider to his own people. We tend not to love the tax collectors of our day, but it’s nothing like it was in Matthew’s day. Tax collectors were considered traitors of Israel, lackies of the Roman government, opportunist crooks and scoundrels of the worst sort. The Roman system of taxation was ingenious. A tax collector like Matthew would pay a fee to the government in exchange for a license to open a tax office, permitting him to collect all the taxes he could. Needless to say, tax collectors were unwelcome in polite society, much less in religious circles.

It comes as a bit of a surprise that Jesus should walk up to Matthew at his tax collector’s office and say to him what He said to the fishermen: “Follow me.” Discipling words. Words that invite Matthew to join Jesus’ rank of followers; words that empower him to arise, leave his tax office, and follow Jesus. An outsider, a tax collector, had just become, by the undeserved kindness of God, an insider, one of Jesus inner circle,

the chosen, apostolic Twelve. I'm sure that raised a rabbinic eyebrow or two, don't you think?

What on earth was Jesus doing, calling a tax-collector to be one of His closest disciples? Is this any way to start a messianic movement? You could understand the four fishermen - strong, hard-working. You could even understand Simon the Zealot - he hated the Roman government and was itching for revolt. But a tax collector? You've got to be kidding!

To make matters even more outrageous, Matthew invites Jesus over to his house for a little party to celebrate his new calling and his group of new friends. The Pharisees looked in on all this with disapproval. They were predisposed to disapproval when it came to Jesus, looking for some way to discredit him. Dinner was an open affair; people on the street could peer in and see the kind of company you kept. They asked Jesus' disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with this rabble - tax collector and sinners?" They wouldn't go near such people. No respectable rabbi would. Why was Jesus hanging out with the losers when He should have been keeping company with the winners?

Jesus heard their question and turned the tables on them. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." When you're well, or at least you think you are well, you have no need or interest in a doctor. But if you suspect something is wrong, if the symptoms are lining up poorly, grab the phone and call for an appointment. You want to see the doctor right away.

Imagine a doctor who didn't want to be around sick people, who comes into the waiting room and looks at all those runny noses and itchy eyes and hears all the coughing and sneezing and covers his mouth and nose and runs out of the room as fast as he can. Not much of a doctor is he? Nor would Jesus be much of a Saviour if He didn't care for the company of sinners.

That was Jesus' mission, his purpose for coming into the world, to seek and to save the lost, to become "lost" in our death in order that we might be found in Him. He came in solidarity with sinners, baptized with sinners in John's baptism of repentance, crucified as a sinner, bearing the guilt of the world on His own shoulders. He became our sin; He embodied our sin in His body. Jesus became the outsider, forsaken, alone, isolated so that in Him we might become "insiders," the children of God, disciples, baptized into his death and life.

Think again about that picture of the cowboys on horseback. Now think about the Pharisees looking in on Matthew's party with Jesus and all of his tax collector friends.

There's an irony here - the insiders are outside, and the outsiders are inside. The Pharisees, who imagined themselves to be God's insiders by virtue of their commandment keeping, are sitting on the outside looking in on a party of tax collectors and sinners surrounding Jesus, the friend of sinners. Where's the church? Outside with the Pharisees or inside with Jesus?

And yet, the gracious light of that party with Jesus shines out even to the Pharisee. There is mercy even for the religious. Jesus gives them a little take home assignment - Go and learn what this means (quoting from Hosea) - "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Go to Hosea and learn what that passage means. Hosea, the prophet who taught that those who were "not my people" would be called the people of God. The outsider would become the insider by grace through faith, just as Abraham became an insider by God's grace and calling through faith which God credited to Abraham as righteousness.

Go and learn what it means - I desire mercy, not sacrifice; the knowledge of God and not burnt offerings. Not religious rituals, that's not the way to the heart of God. "I came not to call the righteous but sinners." That's the company that Jesus keeps at his table. Sinners who are justified for his sake, by his blood. Make no mistake, the Pharisees are welcome at Jesus 'party. But they are welcome as sinners, not as the righteous ones they thought they were.

The sin of the church people, the people in the pews singing the hymns, is that we have turned this banquet of sinners into a country club of the religious elite. We have all too often by our words, our actions, our attitudes looked down on the sinners of our day, those people who just don't seem to get it, and we forget that we are, in ourselves, no better, no more "righteous" no less sinful, than those outside these walls. There are people who are listening in to the church, like those two men on horseback, straining to hear that this good news applies to them too, that they are accepted by God in Jesus.

None of us deserves to be here. We don't deserve to be baptized, to hear the Word, to receive the Body and Blood. We haven't earned our way here by our right choices and decisions. We are here because of God's undeserved kindness in Jesus, the same grace that called Abraham to be the father of nations, that calls a tax collector to be a disciple, that breaks bread with the sinner, that declares the outsider to be the insider.

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Welcome.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.