



Sermon by Bishop Dee Pederson *June, 2023*

Gospel: Matthew 9:9-13, 18-16

⁹ As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. ¹⁰ And as he sat at dinner^[a] in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting^[b] with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹² But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.”

¹⁸ While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader came in and knelt before him, saying, “My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” ¹⁹ And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples.

²⁰ Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, ²¹ for she was saying to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” ²² Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And the woman was made well from that moment.

²³ When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, ²⁴ he said, “Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. ²⁵ But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. ²⁶ And the report of this spread through all of that district.

Jesus is relentless in bringing mercy, compassion, healing, and life to people nobody else wants to associate with – crooks and sick people and dead people, among them!

I don't know about YOU, but I was raised with both clear and subtle messages about who I should and should not hang around with, and where I should and should NOT go:

- Farther out in the country from where I grew up was an area known as “Hungry Hill” – and I really didn't know kids who lived there!
- There was the Finn Settlement. Well, I knew I wasn't Finnish, so that area was off-limits.
- I was aware that the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa lived in a certain area about 20 miles from where I grew up, but we were raised to see no reason to go there. I swam in the Sioux River near our homestead, belonged to the Sioux River Valley 4-H Club, and never wondered about the history of the land or how my great-grandparents came to live there.
- Then there were the churches, organized around cultural and ethnic identity: I grew up in the Norwegian-background church. I had no idea what went on in the Catholic Church. The church everyone called “Holy Rollers” was a scary mystery to me. And even though the Swedish Lutherans probably worshiped just like WE did, denominational division kept us all apart from one another.
- And then, there was my own list of people not to hang around with: mean kids and people who just seemed so different from me.

Maybe there are for each of us, and in every community, people we avoid because the systems that shaped us taught us to KEEP it that way. Think for a moment about who those people were for YOU and how you have been shaped.

In the days of Jesus, there were all kinds of rules about who was in, out, or at the margins; clean or unclean; fit for the presence of God OR NOT. In today's story, God's mission draws Jesus back to his home area of Capernaum, where he breaks with custom and law and brings mercy, compassion, healing, and life to 3 people the hometown folks never would have approved of.

1. Matthew the tax collector, is someone seen pretty much as a creep in 1st century, Roman-occupied Palestine.

- Tax collectors had to work with everybody – including Gentiles – that made them unclean.
- They were personally responsible for handing over the taxes people owed to Rome, and they had the freedom to gouge as much extra from people as they could.
- They were the kind of folks you wanted to stay away from!

Yet Jesus sees Matthew just as he is, looks at HIM with mercy, and with a word - invites him to *“Follow!”*

- And a tax collector follows! But not only that!
- THEN Jesus gathers in a home for a dinner party with a whole GROUP of *“tax collectors and other sinners”*. He doesn’t judge them or tell them they better repent before he will have anything to do with them. He eats with them.
 - And when the religious leaders raise questions about the company Jesus is keeping – he reminds them and anyone else within earshot that he *has not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*
 - As The Message Bible puts it, *“Go figure out what this Scripture means: ‘I’m after mercy, not religion.’ I’m here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders.”*

Those around Jesus thought God wanted them to cut themselves off from people who weren’t acceptable or worthy or religious enough. Jesus turns that thought upside-down with his relentless love of those considered most unlove-able!

2. Next Jesus is met by a respected community leader, who asks him to come & raise his daughter not only back to health, but back to LIFE! *“Come and lay your hand on her, TOUCH HER, and she will live!”* When Jesus gets to the man’s house, the public mourning is in full progress - but he goes where nobody else would go – risking becoming unclean by touching someone who has died – and shows that he is able to bring LIFE even from death.

3. On the way to the home of the leader, Jesus is met by someone else who is an untouchable: an un-named woman who suffers physically for 12 years, is considered ritually unclean and is not allowed to have contact with any body; she is on the margins of her community. So, she sneaks up on Jesus from behind, believing that if SHE can just touch the hem of his clothing, it will be enough for her to be made well. Suddenly,

someone who is isolated from family and friends and her entire community for 12 years (!!) is called, "*Daughter.*" "DAUGHTER!" And she experiences healing in so many ways!

Three people whom the world avoided, kept on the margins, shunned, refused to touch. But in this story, Jesus mixes everything up.

- God joins in a feast. Outsiders become disciples.
- A woman is healed and restored to her community.
- A girl who is dead is resurrected to life and stands.

For 3 people who are each in their own situation of being on the margins, Jesus brings mercy, mercy, compassion, healing, and life – and opens up for them a whole new future, and ushers in a whole new community:

Friends, you and I are here today because we have received the incredible calling to go and do the same: to bring mercy, compassion, healing, and life, to be the hands and feet and love of Jesus – to embody the Word - in a world that so desperately needs it.

Because over these past 4 years, LIFE itself has put us on the margins from each other in so many ways:

- We have been physically distant from each other. I'll always remember the pandemic feeling of backing away from people too close in the store, NOT TOUCHING, avoiding conversation that would cause me to linger in someone's presence, and standing or sitting too close to someone in worship. Muscle memory still causes me to draw back and keep others not just at arm's length, but at 6' length!
- Being physically distant from others for so long created social and emotional isolation – an epidemic of loneliness.
- Across denominations & synods & congregations, we're awfully good at bickering with each, walking away, and continue to dis-membering the body of Christ.
- If that were not enough, politics can become more important than human community, and divisions keep us away from others because we just can't stand the vitriol.

- While peoples' opinions of religion have been plummeting for decades, the conflicts that steal our time and suck up energy in churches CAN coddle us insiders - and do nothing to touch people with the love of Jesus.
- And while we ALL feel our church is friendly, people who are outsiders may not experience that friendliness if they dare set foot in the door! Over the years, I've recognized that I want to invite people to church, but I worry about how that might go. Because if you're not "from here" someone who is an "outsider":
 - may not "get" the liturgy.
 - may get the skunk-eye if you sit down at coffeetime in a circle of well-established friends.
 - will not understand the alphabet-soup of acronyms we float about churches so freely (ELW, ALCW, WOW, SWMN, RMP, MSP.... fill in your own).
 - may not know the cultural nuances – *"yah, you betcha"* - and all the unwritten ways of doing things you bump up against that say: *"Um, sorry, you just don't seem to fit in with us here."*
 - As LeaderWise consultant Mary Kay DuChene wrote, *"I wonder what it would be like for people to feel comfortable to bring their whole selves through the doors of their church...."* And what if you *"ask yourself, "what parts of myself do I 'leave at the door' of my church?"*

Many years ago then-Presiding Bishop H George Anderson wrote a little book titled, *"A Good time to Be the Church."* Back then, I might have agreed. Today, honestly, there are days when I find myself thinking, "Really, dear former-Presiding Bishop?!" And you might agree! Things don't look so great.

- The culture is against us.
- Lutheran history is that if we don't agree with each other, we leave and form our own new group.
- Too many people have been judged in the past or even abused.
- We don't have enough pastors, lay people are tired of helping with things, and the economy holds many questions.

We may be checking all of our systems and data and signals, and concluding with Tom Hanks, *"Houston, we have a problem."*

Well, friends, I'm not sure if it's a "GOOD TIME". But it is the time that we have received. It is our reality to embrace or run away from.

- Like the character in O. Rolvaag's immigrant story, *Giants in the Earth*, there may be days when I am tempted to take my Bible and my hymnal in hand, gather my kiddos in my arms, climb into the old trunk my Great-grandfather brought from Norway, and close the lid – because it could be the one place the pain of this world could not reach me.

But dear beloved friends, this is not a time to climb into the trunks of the past and hide away from the present.

- When a synod long-range planning team was meeting a number of years ago, one of the leaders reminded us that the implements he uses in farming today look nothing like the tools & equipment that used to be found in his grandfather's shed.

We have been called – as we've been saying for 4 years now – "*For such a time as this.*" I honestly believe, dear friends, that if the church felt up to or adequate for the challenges to which God is calling us, we probably aren't being the church God needs for this time.

- I cannot imagine Matthew felt worthy and ready.
- I cannot imagine that when Jesus sends Matthew and the others to proclaim the good news of God's reign, heal every affliction, and gave them authority over unclean spirits, that they felt buoyed up when he also said, "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.*"
- When Paul writes to the early Christians in Rome, he reminds them of how it had always been: that Abraham and Sarah "*hoped against hope*" and *grew strong in faith and gave glory to God, fully persuaded that God could do whatever was promised.*"
- When Luther was confronted by his greatest challenges, he discovered how God is revealed most profoundly in the form of opposites – and most clearly in Christ upon the cross.

God is calling us to BE a church that is real and authentic for THIS TIME, in the same way God called the church to be real in its context for the past 2,000 years – meeting

people with mercy & compassion the way Jesus did in the stories we just heard – inviting and including everyBODY, opening-up community, and bringing healing and life.

- Because we live in the fire of Pentecost, I have to believe God is NOT calling us to be the church I or many of us grew up in!
 - Our structures will look different somehow.
 - Everyone will not look the way I do, or sound like me.
- And because the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit draw us into the circle of the Holy Trinity, they will keep on sending the church to emerge from a global pandemic in 2023 and beyond in new ways!

What remains the same is what Professor Arndt Halvorson used to describe as that rhythm of living from the altar to the street – (eternity symbol) – and back again – nourished by God’s Word & Sacrament and the love of Christian community – and sent out into our daily lives and work, accompanying others where they are, serving and loving the neighbor – returning to worship with a community where we and all people know true belonging and love.

And friends, you are doing this in so many ways across the cities, farmlands, and towns where God has placed our congregations:

- Food ministries Quilting Advocacy Housing Visitation

As Luther wrote, just as God “in Christ freely came to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works.” (Freedom of a Christian). And so God’s story is being lived in YOUR story in new ways as you embody the Living Word in YOUR context. And that, dear friends, is incredibly exciting. Scary – but exciting!

We are united in ministry together in this synod, NOT because our congregations & communities are identical, not because we share the same interests, persuasions, or perspectives - but because in the waters of baptism, our Triune God declared it: you are ONE.

At one time - perhaps a long time ago or not so long ago – Jesus reached out to you and to me: dead in brokenness and sin – washed you in healing waters and spoke that Word of mercy and compassion to YOU, joined you to the death & resurrection of Jesus Christ, sealed you with the Holy Spirit, and marked you with the cross of Christ forever. There may be days when you think you are not worthy, and totally get it that St.

Paul said, *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* But it was Jesus who said, *“I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”* To Jesus, there are none who are in and others who are out; none who are worthier than others. As Luther said, *“We are beggars, every one of us.”* To Jesus, you and I are just people who need mercy, compassion, healing, and life - so we, in turn, might embody the living Word for others.

Jesus said, *“I came not to call not perfect people, but people who know their weakness, people who know their brokenness.”* And his words, *“Follow me,”* have the power to accomplish their mission because it is the Word-in-flesh who speaks them – the One who –

- called a tax collector to become a disciple,
- healed an unnamed woman, and
- raised the dead

forms disciples, a community, a church as YOU embody that WORD today.