

Our Gospel today gives us so many people to look at that I had to stop and just imagine them one by one, as they entered this story.

It begins with Matthew. I imagine him sitting a little table – I don't know what a tax booth looks like. Jesus walks up. Perhaps he's planning to pay some taxes, Matthew thinks. But instead Jesus says, "Follow me." And Matthew up and does.

Why does Matthew do that? Is he curious? Does he hear in that voice an answer to a question he was asking? Is there something broken in him that hears the promise of healing? A tax collector was considered an apostate by the people of Israel, removed from the covenant. Where would this Jesus take him?

The answer was: to dinner. One commentary I read said it was probably at Peter's house. And at this dinner people like Matthew began to arrive and take their seats among the guests – others who had chosen life paths that had separated them from their faith community and covenant with God. I can imagine Matthew maybe making meaningful eye contact or hailing a few acquaintances. Had Jesus brought them here as well? There were other "sinners" there too, which I imagine means prostitutes, but I could be wrong. Still I imagine prostitutes, not working or serving, just eating, just being with Jesus, just welcome. Matthew understood what kind of crowd Jesus had brought him to eat with. His kind of people.

Imagine for a moment arriving at a meal where you feel instantly and fully at home. Where you feel welcome. Where it's clear by the fellow guests whom the host wants to spend time with, and whom the host holds in regard.

But look closer and you'll see that it's mixed company. Maybe the kind that shows up around your Thanksgiving Table, diverse political views, the potential for righteous judgement, people who make you mind the seating arrangements. How did the Pharisees get invited to this banquet?

Does Matthew wonder, "Am I safe here?"

And now a brief word on Pharisees. In Jesus' day, Pharisees were likely not the self-righteous gadflies that they are in the Gospels. Paul was pharisee after all. As was Hillel, whom Jesus often quoted. The Pharisees would save Judaism after the Temple was destroyed and would develop the Rabbinic tradition. They are not as a rule, petty jerks. However, at the time when this Gospel was being written, maybe 40 years after Jesus' resurrection, the Pharisees were working hard to unify a scattered Israel and to create a new way of worshipping without a Temple. Sects like the Jesus movement, with its inclusivity

and welcome of gentiles and sinners worked against that agenda. And you can see that in this story. Just keep in mind that our Scriptures tend to time travel a bit, and they can carry the residue of the conflicts and prejudices of a particular time, which we would be wise not to take with us.

Be that as it may, Matthew the tax collector can't help but overhear the Pharisees at the dinner party questioning the followers of this man who called him away from his job and brought him to this table.

"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

And Jesus cuts in and answers the question himself. Because Jesus doesn't like triangulation, unless it's with the trinity, but that is a topic for last Sunday. Be that as it may Jesus gives this response:

"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."

I wonder how this sounded to Matthew. Does he feel sick? His career choice wasn't just any job. He had chosen to collude with Rome, collecting their forced tribute did not put him in good stead with the former friends and neighbors he had to take it from. If he kept some back for himself, which was the chief criticism of tax collectors, he had some ethical work to do. So yea. He needed a spiritual physician. The fact that he got up and followed Jesus right off the bat may have indicated that he knew that pretty well.

"I desire Mercy not Sacrifice" Jesus said. Matthew and anybody else who read their bible would know this came from Hosea, which we ourselves heard in our first reading. Jesus was quoting God, who wanted ethical behavior from his people, he wanted them to know him with the "steadfast love" of *hesed*, not empty ritual or a pietistic appeal to the rules. God desires mercy, Jesus said to the self-righteous in the room. God desires mercy, Jesus said to the tax collectors who profited off their neighbors' exploitation. God desires mercy, Jesus said to the people of the community that heard the Gospel of Matthew proclaimed to them. God desires mercy, Jesus says to us.

Go and learn what this means, Jesus says, ' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.

Just then a lesson in what that means walks up, right in front of all them, a lesson about what mercy looks like, or better yet, what faith looks like. Because that's actually what the story is about.

Here comes a leader of the synagogue, whom the Pharisees probably knew by name. I imagine that the crowd around Jesus parted to let this distinguished figure through. But instead of joining them in their judging and their side eye, he went right up to Jesus, knelt on the floor in front of him and pleaded for his daughter's life. She was dead. And he was asking this teacher, this healer to lay hands on a corpse and bring her back to life. This was way beyond the law. This was a real test of the covenant with God. This was an act of faith. And in response Jesus up and went with him. Because Jesus knew his Father never said no to faith.

Let's stop here and consider what is meant by faith. It's not simply the belief that Jesus can do the job, that he has miraculous powers. Rather it's the kind of faith that knows how God works, lives out of the

relationship that God has promised his people. It's the kind of steadfast love that doesn't think twice about asking. And had the girl not been raised from the dead, it's the kind of faith that would have understood that God is the God of the living and dead, blessed is the name of the Lord. But it's a faith that asks anyway. It's the faith of Israel on a good day. The faith that Abraham had in God, which Paul described in our second reading today. "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised," Paul said of Abraham. But he could have been talking about this leader of the Synagogue. True righteousness. No law required. We're talking about that kind of faith.

Then up walks another example, this time a woman seeking healing. I bet the crowd parted for her as well, because she had the kind of feminine bleeding that the Law demanded should separate her from the community – a hemorrhage that had lasted for 12 years. You don't want to brush up against that. And when she got to Jesus she fell to her knees and just touched his robe. She wasn't going to ask him to lay hands on her unclean body. But she believed that God's healing power, the kind that fueled the covenant, the kind that came in the form of mercy, would find her if she just reached out and touched the fringe of Jesus' robe.

Jesus could feel the tug of faith, the pull of the covenant, the righteous expectation of the faithful one that God will keep the divine promises. Jesus couldn't get the way of a relationship that strong, a covenant with God that intact. All this woman lacked was access to her community, and Jesus could provide that.

"Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well," he said, loudly enough that all could hear – Matthew, the Pharisees, the leader of the Synagogue, all gathered around the table, all with the keys to let this woman in the kingdom. Who would keep her away now?

Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' Jesus had said, and then taught the lesson himself. But it wasn't over yet.

I wonder if Matthew followed the crowd all the way to the house of the synagogue leader, if he heard the flutes of mourning, the weeping and the wailing? Did he notice their embarrassment at the father's insistence that Jesus could bring his daughter back to life? Did he hear them laugh when Jesus said she was only sleeping? I wonder if Matthew looked in the window after the door was shut against the crowd. Saw Jesus touch the corpse, and watched the corpse come back to life in response?

Go and learn what this means, Jesus said. And I think that's what Matthew did. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners, Jesus said. And I think that's what Mathew was, a sinner who was called.

He was called to leave an old way of life. He was called to rejoin the community of God. He was called to be forgiven and healed, and to forgive and to heal. He was called to follow Jesus, as we all are called to follow.

And he was called to tell the story, as we are called to proclaim the gospel.

And that's the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!