

“Who Are We Following?”

Matthew 9.9-13, 18-26

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For the last several weeks we've been following Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel - it's the longest section of teachings by Jesus in the entire Bible. When Jesus finishes, we are told the crowds were astounded at his teaching “for he taught them as one having authority and not as one of their scribes” (7.29). It should come as no surprise that when Jesus comes down from the mountain, great crowds continue to follow him (8.1). The one who has been proclaiming the Good News of God's kingdom with authority through his words now returns to put that message into action through his deeds.

This morning I invite us to take a closer look at this Jesus who is the leader of our faith. When we call ourselves Christians, who exactly are we following? Who is this One who turned the world upside down, not only by his words but just as importantly, through his deeds? Let's turn now to Matthew's gospel, chapter 9, and listen to God's Word.

Matthew 9.9-13, 18-26 NRSVUE

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.

And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when he heard this, he said, “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 not come to call the righteous but sinners.”

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.” And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. 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, for she was saying to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” 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. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, “Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread through all of that district.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

There's an old saying, "You better watch the company that you keep!" My parents, in their efforts to teach me wrong from right, reinforced this idea that the people you hang out with, your friends and close associates - the so-called company that you keep - these people have a big impact on shaping your character. If you want to be a good person, then you need to hang out with those who share similar values. But if you are not careful and you hang out with people with different or questionable values, then you run the risk of compromising yourself. So you better watch the company you keep!

This conventional wisdom is not only common in today's world, but it's been around for a long time. In the book of Proverbs we read, "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools suffers harm" (Proverbs 13.20). In my work in youth ministry over the years, I have heard parents confess they bring their kids to church so they might associate with the "right kind" of people.

But when we turn to the stories in the Bible, like the one of Jesus calling Matthew the tax collector as a disciple, we see that Jesus has a funny way of turning conventional wisdom completely upside down. "Beware the company that you keep! Hang out with good people so you can become good, too?!" According to Jesus that is all hogwash - complete nonsense! Jesus not only calls Matthew who is a despised tax collector to become one of his followers, he goes on to have dinner with other tax collectors and sinners. This is not how an upstanding teacher should be behaving, and it's no wonder that the upstanding religious leaders have a problem with it. They ask those in Jesus' inner circle, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? Doesn't he know we are judged by the company that we keep?!" As you may know, tax collectors not only worked for the occupying Romans, collecting tariffs and tolls to go to the oppressive empire - they also had a reputation for being corrupt, taking more for their own pockets. And for that reason they were despised and labeled completely immoral. But throughout the gospels we see that Jesus has a habit of befriending these folks, eating at the homes of other tax collectors like Levi and Zacheus and now Matthew and his friends. Who exactly is this Jesus and why is he acting this way?

As we have seen in the Sermon on the Mount, in God's kingdom things are completely turned upside down! In a world that tells us that might makes right, that worldly/material success is a sure sign of God's blessing on you, Jesus shows us another way. The ones who are happy are the poor in spirit, those who are mourning, the peacemakers and the pure in heart - to them belong the kingdom of God! You see, God has a preferential option for those who live on the margins of life, and in today's story of Jesus calling Matthew the tax collector to be a disciple, we see Jesus putting his teachings into practice. Who are we to separate ourselves from others who are labeled as sinners? Who are we to judge others for the speck in their eyes when we have a plank in ours? ***In his words and his deeds, Jesus proclaims the good news that God is a God of mercy who empowers those who are sick to become well, those who are broken to become whole, those who are in need of love to find forgiveness.***

Now, it may be tempting for us to just cheer Jesus on, telling ourselves though he was remarkable as God's Son - someone who turned the world's values upside down - but we must remember that we are not the same as he is, right? We can say, "Well Jesus can hang out with the tax collectors and sinners of the day, but that was his job - but not ours." But my friends, throughout the gospels one thing is clear: Jesus calls us not to be just his admirers but rather his followers. And as his followers we are called to walk in his steps, to not let our hearts be ruled by fear but rather have them guided first and foremost by love. God's love is the type of love that can best be described as a boundary-breaking love, love that welcomes and includes all, breaking the boundaries of those we deem to be good or bad, righteous or un-righteous, worthy or unworthy. You see, God's love crosses over all sorts of human boundaries and categories, and we are called to reflect that same love as his disciples.

When we turn back to chapter 8, we see the first thing Jesus does when he finishes his Sermon on the Mount is that he heals a leper, a man with a serious skin disease. And he does this not remotely like a tele-health doctor, but rather he reaches out and touches the man who is immediately healed (8.1-4). The conventional wisdom of the day was that no one was to touch someone who was labeled unclean. When in a crowd, lepers were supposed to shout out, "Unclean, unclean!" so that people would know to stay away. So the pain the leper felt was not only physical but also social, the stigma of being labeled unclean. Yet time and time again Jesus witnesses to God's boundary-breaking love through the power of his touch. After healing the leper Jesus touches Peter's mother-in-law who has a fever and she is made well (8.15). And in the second half of today's passage touch plays an important role in two healings. First, a woman who was bleeding for 12 years has the courage to touch Jesus in the crowd, and she is healed. Instead of scolding her for an action that would be labeled as ritually unclean, Jesus praises her faith and even calls her daughter. And when Jesus goes to the leader's house and finds this man's daughter dead, Jesus touches her - another ritually unclean thing to do! And he takes her by the hand and then raises her up to new life.

There is much that can be said about these miraculous healing stories of touch, but I want to lift up just a couple of things this morning. First of all, the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years displays a remarkable example of what faith looks like. Here faith is not so much about her saying what she believes about God or Jesus or the power of healing. No, her faith is simply her trust that Jesus holds the power to make her whole. My epiphany star word this year is faith, and so I have been looking at various definitions of what faith means. I love the example of this woman who takes a chance and reaches out to Jesus in the crowd and touches him. She is bold enough to risk possible scolding from the disciples who happen to all be Jewish men - men who knew that she as a woman had no right to touch Jesus. But by putting her faith in action Jesus tells her to take heart, recognizing her not as unclean but as beloved and precious daughter of God. Sometimes when we find ourselves in chronic pain or are stigmatized by our situation that appears to be hopeless, all we can do is reach out to Jesus, trusting that he has the power to make us whole.

We see this same kind of bold faith expressed by the father who comes to Jesus kneeling and telling him that his daughter has just died “But if you come and lay your hands on her, she will live!” (9.18). Such faith is another remarkable example of trust in the One whose love is stronger than death. While the world cannot understand this power, and only laughs in the face of Jesus’ claim that death is not the last word, we know we belong to a God who is always bringing life out of death.

The final thing I want to say about these healing stories is that they give us a picture of Jesus healing not simply through his mighty powers, but through his vulnerability as well.

Jesus is not some superhero who can do remarkable things from a distance. No, the Jesus we follow is One who is intimately involved in the pain and suffering of the world in which he lives. This week I discovered a verse that I never noticed before, an important clue about the type of Savior we are following. When the father tells Jesus that his daughter has died and that Jesus must come and lay hands on her, we are told something remarkable! “Jesus got up and followed him...” Yes, just like Matthew gets up and follows Jesus, so, too does Jesus get up and follow the man to his house, and this decision to follow makes all the difference in the world. Jesus is willing to walk into the pain and brokenness of the lives of the people he encounters - he is willing to get up and enter into the suffering and grief and heartbreak of a parent who has lost a child. It is when he is on the move that the woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years is able to take hold of the hem of his robe. If he was not willing to move and follow the father to their house, I am not sure if the bleeding woman would have had a chance to encounter Jesus. Yes, these healing stories show us that we follow One who is willing to follow the pain and suffering in the world, and this willingness makes all the difference.

It is tempting to think our job as Christians is simply to be a blessing to others who walk into our doors, to create a welcoming and loving church family where people can come and find love and support and care. The love and support and care we provide one another is essential to our mission as disciples of Jesus. But the love should never stop there! We are called to follow One who is willing to go into the world where there is much poverty, brokenness and death. We are called to be the hands and feet of the One who showed us what the boundary breaking love of God looks like in the flesh. ***So this morning I invite you to consider this Jesus, the One who calls us to follow him into the world. Where might he be calling us to go, both as individuals and as a community of faith? Where are we being called to witness to the healing power of the Risen Christ?*** Whether it's learning first hand about the ministry at the Crossnore School, or becoming penpals with the inmates at the correctional center, or learning more about the needs of our global Presbyterian neighbors in Malawi or Guatemala, we are certainly called to follow the One who follows the needs of the world. And the amazing good news is that wherever we go, God promises to meet us there - to be there in the brokenness and pain and needs of the world that God so loves!

Thanks be to God. Amen.