

Follow Me

The text for today is jam-packed. The call of the tax collector. The father with the daughter who is raised from the dead. The hemorrhaging woman who is healed.

Our passage starts out with the call of Matthew the disciple. We don't know much. Just this: Matthew is a tax collector. He is doing his job. Jesus appears and calls, "Follow me." Matthew leaves his tax booth—no questions, no stalling, no excuses—and follows.

That may indeed be all that we need to know. Jesus called one considered to be a sinner of the utmost degree and that person followed. Jesus would have known that if ever you wanted people to accept you, you stayed away from tax collectors. But Jesus asked someone who, because of his profession, would have been assumed to always act in self-interest to become one of his disciples.

Not only that, but we read on to discover that Jesus dines with him and his depraved friends. Jesus knows better. He lives in a social world that is defined by polarities: the righteous and the unrighteous, the religious and the irreligious, the sinner and the Pharisee.

Gentiles were avoided, Samaritans were hated, sinners were outcast, lepers were quarantined, the sick were kept apart, and those who buried the dead were considered unclean for a week.

It's all a very clearly defined and tidy religious world. Yet Jesus is not bound by such. He comes in and wrecks the place, proclaiming that he has come to save not the righteous but the sinner.

Jesus' behavior disturbs and threatens the tidy world. His association with sinners blurs the lines and uncovers a grace so amazing that religious people, otherwise snug in the security of their religious identities, are left unsettled.

We can understand why the Pharisees are so indignant. Theirs was a world where they had security. They were the insiders, and they controlled who else got in. It was a clearly defined either-or world. And they had a selfish interest in keeping it that way.

We have heard of churches going through tough times within their congregations. Especially when they are neither conservative nor liberal but instead include in their midst folks across the spectrum. It makes for a rich congregation. It also makes for controversy.

Because there are people from across the spectrum, they can often disagree with one another. Most often they do this with great integrity, with the desire to understand and be understood, and with love.

However, there are times when it doesn't happen that way. There can be ongoing disagreements between some of the most conservative families and the most liberal ones.

It can manifest itself in many ways that we might expect in the church: debates over what programs and projects got funded, and disagreements over how they worshiped.

Sometimes the differences continue, and it makes it impossible to continue worshipping together.

It's the same place that the Pharisees went wrong—in wanting some in and some out. And Jesus has no regard for such. The thing is discipleship isn't an either-or proposition. You aren't either a disciple or a sinner.

We are all sinners, and all called to be disciples, just like Jesus called a tax collector.

Our call is that simple, too: "Follow me." Follow me to dinner with the sinners and degenerates. Follow me to include the lost and the least. Follow me to stand with the outcast and unwelcome. Follow me to extend grace and mercy.

That's what happens later in our passage today when Jesus encounters two very different people: one a leader in high standing in the synagogue who has confidently come to Jesus seeking healing for his daughter assumed to be dead and one a woman outcast from society because she suffered from hemorrhages for years.

She timidly approaches Jesus and touches his garment. And lo and behold, Jesus heals both of them. No arguing about their worthiness. No scolding the father for asking Jesus to make himself unclean by standing alongside a corpse. No sending away a woman who has been marked by society as unclean. No, there's only healing and grace. Everyone gets the same thing: mercy and compassion.

That's the good news and the bad news: Jesus treats both healing stories the same. Jesus recognizes no codes or traditions that should keep him from these people. He applies no test for proper doctrine, no question regarding their political convictions, no

calculation of their gender, ethnicity, or social standing. He sees only their need to be touched, to be healed, to be loved, and to be forgiven.

Some days we like that news, and other days we don't. We like it on the days that we see ourselves in need—that like the woman and the father, we need Christ's healing touch. We don't like it on the days that we want to consider ourselves insiders, the first in line to be called a disciple or to be healed.

We don't like it on those days because what we discover is that we will be treated just the same as all of God's children. We will be loved and supported and cherished, but so will all the other children of God.

Some days this works for us, and some days it doesn't. Why?

Because.

Because we want to believe on many days that we are more special than others. But the fact of the matter is we aren't. That's also the good news of the day. God loves us all. All of us equally.

That means that when we come to worship in this sanctuary, we have no more right to be here than anyone else. It means that there's a place for everybody—the person who just cut you off in traffic getting to church today; the person who has loved you all the years of your life; the co-worker or classmate who has stolen your work and taken credit; the neighbor who, when you needed to take care of a family emergency, took up residence in your home caring for your children; the stranger who has broken into your home and stolen your sense of security; the confidant who has kept your innermost secrets and loved you anyway; the compassionate and the couldn't-care-less; the one who interprets scripture differently and acts out faith in ways you think unfaithful; the one with different sexual practices and social circles; the righteous and the unrighteous; the sinner and the saint.

There is a place for all of us in God's kingdom. And some days that sounds good to us because it's what we need, but other days it doesn't sound so good because it isn't what we believe our neighbors deserve. But God's mercy isn't about what any of us deserves. It's about what we get.

And the other part of the news is that it means that's what we're expected to give: to exchange anger and hatred for mercy, to exchange exclusiveness with compassion, to exchange grudges and judgment with forgiveness, to take a stand with those outside

the inside, to be the first to extend a second chance just as God gives us a chance and chance again. We are to be the means by which this world's people have a second chance.

The point is that we are all called to take a stand. That's our job: to leave a legacy that upsets the status quo, the old notions of who is in and who is out; to follow Christ wherever we find the needs of this world, whether it be the halls of knowledge or the slums of the city, the nursing home or prison cell, the courtrooms of justice or the bedside of the dying; to leave a path behind that others can follow, responding to Christ's call, "Follow me."

But before we go out to serve the lost, we must be found. We must be found believing that God cares for our days and our ways, our living and our dying, that God cares uniquely for us and loves us dearly. That's the first step in responding to God's call upon our lives.

We must be found saying yes when Jesus calls, "Follow me."

So be found today during this time of worship. And when you share in the service today, you come because Christ has invited you.

Come proclaiming the saving life of Christ until he shall come again.

Come as a beloved and cherished child of God whether you're stuck in the lost place or the found place or can't figure out the difference.

Come believing that there is a place for you whether you are a sinner or disciple or both.

Come to take a seat with mercy and healing and to take a stand with compassion and grace.

And leave here today to take a stand, to leave a legacy of care and compassion, to respond to Christ's call, "Follow me."

"Come and follow," Christ bids. So, friends, come and follow, and in so doing, take your seats in the house of the Lord. All to God's glory and honor and praise. Amen.