

2023 06 11 – Healing the Sick

Scripture: Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26 (The Inclusive Bible)

I was thinking this week about the church in general and our congregation in particular and how we are worried about declining numbers and unbalanced budgets. Often we hear people suggesting that we just need more people in the pews. That we need to invite new people to come to our church. But after reading this week's scripture passage, I wonder if that's really what we truly desire. Do we really want to grow our congregation?

You see today's reading is about the early part of Jesus' ministry when he was pulling together his group of disciples and gathering followers around him. It was a time of growth for his movement within the Jewish tradition. In fact, the reading begins with Jesus asking Matthew, who eventually becomes one of the twelve, to follow him. At first reading, you might think, "what a wonderful example of call, of someone answering God's call to ministry." And it is. But this particular call has even more meaning.

Matthew was a tax collector. In fact, he was sitting at his post, collecting taxes, when Jesus approached him. Matthew was likely a kind of customs official, charging a "toll" or "tax" on goods being transported to market. Such booths were often set up along roadsides near fishing villages. Tax collectors were widely unpopular, not only because the taxes themselves were onerous, and not only because such funds supported the Roman Empire, their oppressors, but also

because tax collectors were often suspected of charging more than required, and pocketing the difference.

Just imagine, if I went up to someone in Swift Current who was widely known as a “shady character,” and invited them to come and join our congregation or even our Leadership Team. How would you feel? How do you think the other disciples felt? The fishermen, Simon & Andrew, James & John, were the ones who had previously been paying those taxes. They were probably not very happy to find a tax collector in their midst!

But Jesus didn't stop there, he went to Matthew's house to eat and other tax collectors and notorious “sinners” came to join. The scripture tells us that Jesus' disciples were there too. The Pharisees, the local religious leaders, were outraged and commented on Jesus' behaviour. They couldn't believe that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors!

But Jesus, overhearing their remark said, “People who are in good health don't need a doctor, sick people do. Go and learn the meaning of the words, ‘I desire compassion, not sacrifices.’” Jesus went on to say, “I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners.” Jesus was quoting Hosea 6:6 to the learned scholars. He was reminding them of the words of the ancient prophet; words that emphasized love and compassion over rules and sacrificial rituals.

The Jewish people in Jesus time had many rules and several of their rules were about cleanliness. One cleanliness rule specified those things that would make a

person ritually unclean if you touched them. This rule included, dead bodies, women who were having their period, and animals that had died naturally or had been killed without the proper rites. But Jesus was a healer and, as he told the Pharisees, he often chose healing and compassion as a priority over Jewish laws.

In the second half of today's scripture reading, we are given two examples of Jesus healing power and his disregard for the rules. First a woman who has been menstruating or hemorrhaging for twelve years comes and touches the hem of his cloak believing a mere touch will heal her. Jesus, rather than rebuking her for making him unclean, praises her and heals her saying, "Courage, daughter, your faith has healed you."

The second healing takes place at the house of a synagogue official. This man believes his daughter has died, but he asks Jesus to lay hands on her and bring her back to life. When Jesus arrives the official mourners are already there. Jesus clears the house and then takes the young girl by the hand, touching her dead body and raising her up. For a second time, Jesus is more focussed on compassion and healing than he is on the rules of cleanliness.

Jesus is demonstrating to the religious authorities, to his disciples and to all who will listen, that his ministry is about healing the sick. Sickness, of course, comes in many forms. We can be physically, mentally, emotionally, or even spiritually ill. Matthew was called not because he needed to be cured of a physical ailment, but

because he was struggling with a sickness of the spirit. Jesus, saw beyond that illness and recognized the gifts that Matthew could offer in his ministry.

Jesus' followers were not chosen because of their perfect lives or righteous living. They were chosen because they needed to know that they were loved. They were chosen because they needed the healing power of God's love in their lives. They were chosen because they needed to hear and to experience the good news that Jesus was preaching.

We are here because we too are followers of Jesus. We are really no different than those followers who lived 2000 years ago, are we? Think about it. If we created a continuum that went from sinner to saint, from sick to well where would we all fit on that line? I know I arrived at the door of the church over 30 years ago searching for community, searching for healing, searching for the good news. I received so much of what I was looking for, but I also know that my healing path continues. Aren't we all on a journey of healing and transformation?

If we are truly interested in growing this congregation, then, like Jesus, we should be searching for those who need to hear and experience the good new of God's love. We need to find the sick and the sinner and invite them in. We need to look beyond whatever judgement or prejudice we may be feeling and open our doors to people like us, people who need, who want, to be healed.

May it be so. Amen.