

Sermon for 7th June 2026, Year A, Pentecost 2, Proper 5

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Sermon

Throughout today's Gospel reading, all the normal social conventions are turned upside down. We've become used to this where Jesus is concerned, but this reading almost overwhelms us with so many things happening at once.

We start with Matthew being called from his life as a wealthy tax-collector into a far humbler one as a disciple of an itinerant rabbi. Jewish tax-collectors were of course hated by other Jews. They were not only collaborators with their Roman oppressors, but they also made their living by overcharging their own countrymen on the taxes they were forced to pay their overlords. But Jesus goes straight to this extremely unworthy sinner at the tax booth and says, "Follow me," and so Matthew gets up and is welcomed as part of Jesus's community.

If Matthew thought he was going to have time to go cold-turkey on the tax-collecting scene in private, however, he must have been in for a bit of a shock, because in the very next scene, Jesus and his disciples are having dinner with many tax-collectors and other sinners (in Matthew's own house according to Luke and Mark's Gospels), and many of these must have been Matthew's friends and colleagues, because he certainly wouldn't have found friends in any other context. We can imagine Matthew trying to explain why he's given up such a lucrative career and is now with a wandering rabbi who seems happy to eat with people everyone else hates and spits on. Perhaps the tax-collectors themselves are desperate for the redemption that Matthew has found, but which they have always feared was beyond their reach. How many people, even today, assume

that Church is only for the holy people and that they're not themselves worthy to darken the door?

The Pharisees, those bastions of religious propriety who love to bar the door to keep the inferior people out, can't resist the opportunity to have a go – not at Jesus directly, but at his less confident students, including, now, Matthew himself, whose discipleship begins with hearing Jesus criticised for being willing to interact with the very group that until earlier that day he was still part of.

Jesus's response to this righteous criticism shows why the Old Testament reading from the prophet Hosea was also chosen for today. After defending his own actions by acknowledging that tax-collectors are certainly in need of the redemption he is offering them, he nevertheless points out that the pure and righteous Pharisees have got their own scriptures back to front, and he quotes the prophet Hosea, who speaks for God saying, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." Or, as Jesus puts it more simply, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

The Pharisees, of course, fervently believe that God demands a heavy sacrifice of all his people, whether it is actual blood sacrifices in the Temple, or the personal sacrifice of following hundreds of strict religious rules. For them, 'mercy' would simply mean letting people escape their religious duties without any consequences, like calling 'sin,' 'good.' They can't see how their fervent exclusion of such religious rule-breakers completely bars the door to those they hope to convert. If there's no hope of any salvation or inclusion in God's Kingdom, if everything you do is judged and criticised, then why even make any effort? God, however, offers mercy first, forgiveness first, love first – and it is our experience of this love that transforms us and makes us able to show mercy and love to others, which is precisely what builds God's community in the world – not perfect rule-following.

It's not just the Pharisees who get this backwards. Church leaders throughout our history have often prioritised the need for religious purity and perfectly correct beliefs and criticised those who sought mercy for themselves or anyone else. Even when Jesus openly says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," still the response of many Church leaders has been to say, "Amen, but only for us, not those sinners over there. No mercy for them until they agree we're right on everything, otherwise they'll never change."

And that's only the first reversal in our Gospel reading today. There are several more to come.

The remainder of the passage contains the intersecting stories of two people who are desperate for Jesus's healing touch. The first is a man of high status – the leader of the synagogue – whose daughter has died. But he has absolute faith that Jesus can and will heal her back to life.

The second person is a woman of very low status, excluded with disgust because of her health condition, who does not even consider herself worthy to speak to Jesus. Instead, she thinks, 'If I can touch the fringe of his cloak, I will be made well.' She too has incredible faith.

So, we have two people at the completely opposite end of the social spectrum who are both united in their absolute faith in Jesus's power and his willingness to help, and in both cases, Jesus is at risk of becoming ceremonially unclean and losing social status by helping them. If he comes into physical contact with the woman who has uncontrollable bleeding, then this makes him unclean. If he touches the dead body of the synagogue leader's daughter, then he becomes unclean. Society says that high status, righteous individuals like rabbis do not do these things. They associate only with other high status and righteous individuals and they keep themselves pure.

But what does Jesus do? He calls the woman, “daughter” including her in God’s family when everyone else had segregated her. And he places his hand on the synagogue leader’s daughter – same word, ‘daughter’ – and restores her to life, though everyone else had declared her dead.

Significantly, I think, Jesus does all this in as low-key a way as possible. He declares that the leader’s daughter is only sleeping, not dead, so he hadn’t really touched the dead body or performed a miracle. He tells the haemorrhaging woman that she has been healed by her own humility and faith, not by any great miracle of his holy touch.

Wherever Jesus goes, social conventions are turned upside down and barriers between segregated people are broken. Jesus calls the sinful tax collector to be his disciple and eats dinner with those the Pharisees consider unworthy of social inclusion. An important synagogue leader bows down before the rabbi from a humble village and pleads for help. A woman who would be looked at with disgust whenever she appeared in public has the courage to reach out to touch the holiest man she has ever met. And with the touch of his hand, and despite all the mockery, Jesus raises a dead girl back to life.

Throughout all these healing stories, Jesus prioritises those who are in need of healing or redemption, and especially those who recognise that need. Righteous people, like the Pharisees, but also like many modern people, have often been trained by upbringing or experience not to admit to any need, or are too self-satisfied or arrogant to understand the depth of their own need. But for those who have the humility to trust that God will come and welcome and love them even though they are not by any means perfect – these are the people who find themselves embraced by God’s mercy, and who, together, become God’s family.