

June 11, 2023  
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*Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26*

*As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; 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 him 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 come to call not the righteous but sinners."*

*[14-17 Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put • into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved."]*

*While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue 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 hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said 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 instantly the woman was made well. 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 throughout that district.*

Here's a question for this morning – albeit not a novel one but one that is central to why we are here. What does it mean to be a religious person today? A person of faith? A Christian: baptized and willing to check off Christianity on any questionnaire that asks one to choose?

One thing is apparent for those here and those online: common worship. As the expression goes: "it's what we do." It is what Christians, and our Jewish ancestors did before us. Gather, pray, sing, learn, eat of the spiritual food that feeds us.

In today's world, when the culture does not bend to our Sunday routines, may we never take the importance of our gathering for granted. The fancy Latin for this is: *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi, Lex Vivendi*. As we worship, so we believe, so we live. This all shapes us in ways we may never know.

Once gathered, we can move to: how do we live and act and behave? How should we speak and listen as believers? Think? Consume? Vote? Not vote? How do we act when we are around others and perhaps more revealing: when no one is watching?

If you put these questions into any computer search engine, you will be flooded with all kinds of answers – most of which would seem foreign and out of step to me and not very helpful.

To me, it's a question each one of us should ask and answer for ourselves. As Anglicans and Episcopalians – our flavor of Christianity – we can use Scripture, Tradition and Reason, our go-to 3-legged stool to shift through all things theological. What does the Bible teach and how might we interpret these ancient texts in light of how they've been lived out over the centuries and how our minds and reason should come into play. By in large, we are not a community that interprets the Bible literally, but reads these inspired texts to inspire us, and point us to God's plan of salvation, love, care, and rescue for all of us and Creation.

A good place to start is the Gospel passage before us for today. Each week we hear how ordinary people were responding to Jesus as he lived, taught, gathered, and healed the sick. They had access and proximity to the Lord that you and I don't have. And they were living in a fishbowl of sorts -- under the microscope of the religious authorities of the day and the Roman occupiers waiting to stamp out any sign of rebellion or trouble.

In the passage for today, what seems to concern the religious rule keepers was a common one that filters down through every generation: mainly, to what extent are we identified and known by the company we keep.

Parents over time have been known to express concern about who their children and teenagers are hanging out with. Even self-identified Christian parents who have heard what Jesus said about loving one's neighbor and 'do not judge lest you be judged' – they still want to know who Johnny and Emma are running with... Are they with the right crowd or the wrong crowd? Good kids or 'verdict is still out' with that group? The prevailing wisdom is that you don't want those you care for go down the proverbial wrong track if you can help it. To what extent are we impacted by those around us? Human osmosis if you will.

Which brings us to the scene in Matthew 9. The setting was dinner. Matthew the tax collector had recently joined up with Jesus – which was a scandal on its own for all the reasons we've long heard about: tax collectors were imbedded collaborators with the hated Romans. The dinner invite list looks like it grew quickly and became quite a scene, enough for the Pharisees to poke around and take notice: "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Why was Jesus running with the wrong crowd up to no good? Jesus would not be the typical rabbi and teacher in so many ways.

In the verses 14-17 that for some reason were omitted from today's lectionary, we read: V. 14: "Then the disciples of John came to Jesus, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" Between the lines, I feel like they were really asking: why are we missing out on all the fun? They were the followers of the ascetic and wild locust eating John the Baptist, who was not one for parties and dinners and spent his time in the desert in full repentance mode.

In real time, those who were closest to Jesus were living out the question we are posing this morning: how should we act and what company should we keep or avoid?

How we answer these questions may cause us to experience something that happened to Jesus: being laughed at.

Only moments before this dramatic and powerful turnaround, we hear: As Jesus approached the house, he 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.

I wonder how many times Jesus was laughed at. We know he was mocked on the cross. Laughed at for the collection of ragtag fisherfolk, rebels, and woman who followed him? Laughed at for slowly discovering that he was different from others? Laughed at for believing that each person is worthy of God’s love and should not be tossed away and left out.

I don’t know anyone who likes being laughed at. It’s probably happened to all of over the course of our lives. In school, on the playground, showing at an event over or underdressed. “I’m not laughing at you – we say -- I’m laughing with you.” If only that were the always the case.

And they laughed at Jesus. For believing in God’s power to do what could not be imagined. For believing that a woman could be healed after twelve years of suffering.

The incredibly gifted singer Brandi Carlile wrote an amazing song call ‘The Joke’ released in 2017 and was nominated for a Grammy for the Song of the Year.

As Carlile tells it, the song’s meaning is rooted in the story of those who are criticized and beaten down. But, as the singer makes clear, often it’s those same people who have the last laugh.

Carlile in an interview, “There are so many people feeling misrepresented [today] ... So many people feeling unloved.

In fact, Carlile talks about the song in her memoir, Broken Horses.

“I thought of Aleppo, Jordan, Iraq, and all the beautiful children ... living their lives in refugee camps. I thought about mothers fleeing bombs and violence, carrying their babies on their backs. And I thought about Jesus.

“You don’t have to like that Jesus is my home base. You can use it to discredit me in the name of ALL the harm Christianity has done. But something mystical brings me back time and time again to the revolutionary gospel of forgiveness. The song is just for people that feel under-represented, unloved, or illegal.”

Her powerful lyrics:

‘They can kick dirt in your face  
Dress you down, and tell you that your place  
Is in the middle, when they hate the way you shine’

‘Let ‘em laugh while they can  
Let ‘em spin, let ‘em scatter in the wind  
I have been to the movies, I’ve seen how it ends  
And the joke’s on them’

The joke is on those who laughed at Jesus and laugh at those who believe. We believe in mercy. That a carpenter with a mysterious birth story and a tragic death can continue to touch people's soul and hearts and make our lives have meaning and lift our voices and hopes to a higher place.

I wanted to end with this blessing: A Blessing of Change.

What we choose changes us.  
Who we love transforms us.  
How we create remakes us.  
Where we live reshapes us.  
So in all our choosing, O God, make us wise;  
In all our loving, O Christ, make us bold;  
In all our creating, O Spirit, give us courage;  
in all our living, may we become whole.

AMEN.