

PROPER FIVE, PENTECOST 2, YEAR A, JUNE 11, 2023

We are all familiar with the expression that you are known by the company you keep. As parents we try to instill that logic into our children in some ways to protect them from bad influences. But Jesus had no such reluctance! He made friends with those who were considered "sinners," the outsiders, abused, and nobodies of his time and gave them "hope against hope that their situation could change. Because of that, he was severely criticized by those who were content with how things were and their place in it.

Today's gospel contains three such stories. First, there was the tax collector, Matthew. He was sitting in the tax booth, making his money by swindling people by over-charging and keeping the profit. Financially, he was better off than most, but socially, he was an outcast. There was no hope that he would be accepted by anyone except the Roman authorities and his own colleagues. Yet, Jesus came and said to him, "Follow me." In a sudden spark of "hope against hope" Matthew took a chance and dropped everything and followed Jesus.

What is even more egregious, in this little vignette, is that Jesus sat down with all those tax collectors and ate with them and laughed with them. The synagogue leaders couldn't comprehend how someone who considered himself a rabbi could stoop so low and break so many kosher and religious laws. That's why they asked Jesus why he spent so much time with tax collectors and sinners. His answer was simple, "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."

Next, we are introduced to a leader of a synagogue. Unlike Matthew, the synagogue leader had many friends and associates. He was a part of the group that criticized Jesus for eating with sinners! But, all of a sudden he is suddenly thrust into his own family tragedy, and he decides to risk his own reputation. Jesus was the one who, he heard about, that could possibly offer "hope against hope" for him. Sometimes it takes a tragedy to recognize that something or someone is far more precious than one's social, political and religious standing. In this case the synagogue's leader's daughter was precious to him, far more precious than his standing as a highly respected official. He was in need of a physician. Ironically, he lowers himself and kneels before this peasant healer, hoping against hope that he could help. Jesus responded to his plea and began to follow him towards his home. The crowd approved; after all, this was an important, righteous and moral man not someone like Matthew, the tax collector.

But then there is an interruption by a woman who hoped she would not be noticed. Because if she received any notice at all, it would be negative. She would be despised for even being there. This woman had been unclean and untouchable for twelve years due to hemorrhages but now she was hoping against hope that if she just could touch Jesus' garment, she would be healed. She dared not approach him face to face so, instead, touched his garment. Yet, he felt her presence, brought her to the forefront and then called her, "daughter," a term of high regard for a woman, healed her and commended her for her faith.

But imagine for a moment what the synagogue leader must have been thinking. Here was this unclean women touching Jesus rendering him unclean too. His heart

must have sunk as he believed this would delay Jesus from touching his daughter without going through a purity ritual. Here again, Jesus is unconcerned. Traveling on and arriving at the man's house, he touches the girl's lifeless body and hope against hope, she is revived.

It is clear from these three vignettes that Jesus didn't care about the company he kept or about purity rituals that determined who was clean or unclean or more to the point of who is acceptable and unacceptable. These are the people who Jesus determined needed him the most. Matthew, whose occupation as a tax collector, had set him apart from being a part of a respectable community and who had no reason to imagine a life of purpose in God's kingdom.

Then we have a religious leader who had no rational reason to hope that his daughter's death would be reversed. Then there is the woman whose illness had separated her from her community for over a decade who had no reason to think that she would be able to get close to Jesus and be made whole so she could once again be an active, integral part of her community. It seems that the criteria for being in the company of Jesus is the need of mercy and healing. Jesus chose those who clung to unreasonable hope that he would make a difference. Jesus chose to show love and mercy instead of being bound by the laws. For Jesus love always surpasses the law.

Do you ever wonder about the rest of the story? We know Matthew became a disciple, as our tradition indicates but how did his life affect others especially the other tax collectors who were his friends. What happened to the woman? Was her healing seen as a miracle to those around her, and did she bring others to faith? And what of the synagogue leader? Did he keep silent in order to maintain his high position about who he thought Jesus might be, or did he risk becoming a follower of this unclean, radical healer? And the little girl? What did it mean for her to be brought to life again? Did she have a new sense of her own value?

There are so many layers in this gospel account. There are so many lessons to be learned. One is to recognize that in God's kingdom, those who are condemned, ridiculed, ignored, or pushed away are given reason to hope --- hope against all rational reason to hope. This gospel tells us if you feel like you are a nobody --- unnoticed and unworthy - if those around you either hate you or disregard you---if you are feeling invisible and nobody knows your pain, and if they did, they would condemn you then know that Jesus seeks you to be your friend, to raise you up and heal you, to surprise you with new life as you "hope against hope" for a new beginning! During this pride month we need to recognize and support our LBGTQ+ sisters and brothers who are the target of hatred, ridicule and pain from others on a daily basis.

Another lesson is that there are no boundaries that separate us from the grace and healing and unconditional acceptance of Jesus. Jesus calls the most unlikely people to follow him and testify to his mercy and love.

Jesus asks us to "Follow me." However, to do so means we have to move out of our comfort zone of who we think is acceptable or unacceptable. Who do you consider a sinner? Who do you consider a honorable, virtuous or moral person? Truth is all of us are both and are all in need of Jesus' mercy and love. Jesus calls us to do business differently than the way we have been doing our business. Jesus calls us to live the radical lifestyle of love that mirrors the Kingdom of Heaven.

Then perhaps the most important lesson today is following the way of mercy and compassion and unconditional love, which means life will be risky. Just as Jesus' actions upset the order of his society, our following his way should and will upset the way things are ordered today because to follow Jesus means living a radical lifestyle of love.

Jesus seeks to help us let go of all our prejudices, hatreds, stubbornness, lack of compassion and asks us to trust that he can heal us of those things that is the antithesis of him and God's love. We are all in need of his love and mercy and he wants us to become the messengers, the bearers of this hope against hope so we too can help others be relieved of being excluded, being ostracized for who they are, being kept invisible and unequal and standing with those seeking justice so together we can be restored to new life in God's kingdom.

Because after all, that's what being a true Christian is all about. Amen.