

## ***Salvation is for Losers***

Sunday, June 10, 2023

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

by Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

*Jesus calls out to outcasts and tax collectors, offering gifts of healing and mercy.*

Matthew reminds us that Jesus has come home, back to Capernaum where he lives. Yet there's no indication he's come home for a bit of R& R. He's out for a walk, calling disciples, and offering healing.

In chapter nine, Jesus has returned to Capernaum, the place where he lives. Having crossed the sea into the land of the Gentiles, he has now returned to his home turf, bringing signs of healing and hope, all of it demonstrating the sort of mercy he announced in the Sermon on the Mount.

Yet these stories are hardly innocuous. They are upsetting and scandalous. They seem out of place like a sign someone told me they once saw. A couple was driving past through a small town and saw a sign hanging in front of a little country store/café/bait shop. The top line read, "Eat Lunch Here!" while the bottom said, "We have worms!"

Jesus actions seem almost as incongruous. Notice how these stories are stitched together. First he meets Matthew, a tax collector. That sounds like a perfectly fine occupation until you realize that tax collectors were collaborators with Rome whose job it was to exploit Jewish fishermen, exacting outrageous fees for the fish they collected. But Jesus does not condemn this man, he invites him to follow. Even worse, however, is that later in the evening, Jesus is having a party at his home. It seems as though a few of the tax collector's friends along with "other sinners" have decided to crash the party. Jesus welcomes them, apparently oblivious that his guest list reads like the FBI's Ten Most Wanted.

Next Jesus encounters a religious leader whose daughter is dying. Likely he's heard about Jesus' reputation as a healer. He falls down before Jesus, bares open his soul, and pleads with him to come and touch his daughter so that she'll live. While Jesus heads off to the guy's house, he's interrupted yet one more time by a woman plagued by a relentless, decades-long hemorrhage. She reaches out to touch the fringes of his cloak, the *tallit* of his prayer shawl that represent a Jewish man's adherence to the law.

It's a telling reminder that God's mercy extends to the fringes. In fact, at every stop, Jesus proclaims a salvation for losers.

That's not a sign you'll see posted outside of any church. "We welcome losers" sounds a bit like "We have worms." No church growth expert will tell you that filling a church with odd balls and losers will be a winning formula for exponential growth. Few of us would be attracted by an invitation that reads, "Dear Loser, we hope you'll join us for worship next Sunday at Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church.

No one will say that, except maybe for Jesus.

A few years ago, the hymn writer John Bell was visiting a church in Indiana. The preacher preached a sermon called "The Kingdom of God is for Losers." Afterwards, the minister challenged Bell to write a "hymn for losers." If I were more daring, I might have suggested we try singing it, but I found the tune a bit hard. The words are remarkable, however:

"Christ is for losers, the last, and the least, welcoming sinners and saints to his feat, turning away those who bring their own bread—all those who assume they don't need to be fed."<sup>1</sup>

Christ for losers—well, frankly it does not sound like a message that speaks to the successful, or those who have worked hard their whole lives. It may not sit well with you. It's reported that the famous media mogul Ted Turner, the founder of CNN, once said, "Christianity is for losers." I suppose he meant that in a derogatory fashion, and its possible people would agree.

Who says something like that?

Robert Fulghum once told the story of a boy named Norman. Norman was a quiet kid who did not talk too much in class. Most of the time Norman seemed lost in his own thoughts, content to be in his own world. One day in elementary school, Norman's teacher announced that the spring play would be "Cinderella." She asked for volunteers for the different parts: who wants to be the handsome prince? Who would like to be Cinderella? The wicked stepmother, and the ugly stepsisters? Pretty soon the cast was complete; everyone had a part except for Norman.

"Norman," the teacher said. "I'm afraid all of the main characters are taken. But I'm sure we can find an extra part for you. What would you like to be?"

Norman quickly replied, "I would like to be the pig!" And immediately the class erupted in laughter.

"Pig?" said the teacher, "But Norman, there is no pig in Cinderella."

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<sup>1</sup> "Christ is For Losers," text by Adam M. Tice, 2006 (copyright GIA Publications, Inc., permission for use granted by OneLicense.net.

“There is now,” said Norman, grinning from ear to ear. a

Norman was a bit like Jesus. All around him people resist his call to go wild. They tell him a Messiah is not supposed to hang out with losers. He should be above people like that. The Messiah is called to offer a path of holiness and righteousness, not offer a party for sinners. The Messiah should not be bothered with women wanting to be healed or little girls on their death beds.

They tell him there’s no place for a Messiah who hangs out with riffraff, no place for one who acts so irresponsibly. What sort of Messiah befriends losers?

Jesus says, “This one does.”

Jesus proclaims a mercy rooted within the traditions of Israel. He is not abandoning the teachings, but instead is reminding God’s people that there are both horizontal and vertical dimensions to the kingdom of God—and we are called to pursue both. At last month’s Festival of Homiletics, I had the opportunity meet Amy Jill Levine, a wonderful Bible professor whose books and videos have been the sources of many wonderful adult education sessions at Woodlawn. I told her that her studies have had a profound impact on our church. She looked at me and said, “I hope you mean that in a positive way!” Turning close to me she said, “I’ve never seen the videos. Tell me, how does my hair look?”

In her lecture, Levine, who is an orthodox Jew, reminded us that the church has perpetuated a tradition of mischaracterizing Jews and Jewish traditions in the New Testament. Her point is that only when we understand Jesus’ Jewishness will we understand the roots of our faith. She is particularly keen on reminding us that the Pharisees, whom we have long castigated as hypocrites and pious holier-than-thou types, were actually good and faithful Jews who were trying hard to embody their faith. They were, in many ways, just trying to act like good Christians – or perhaps good Jews.

So, when the Pharisees call out Jesus, they are simply saying what we might say: how can you promote holiness and faithfulness when you’re hanging out with losers?

Jesus responds by telling them he brings a tangible mercy, a mercy that forgives and renews. He brings healing as a sign of God’s anointing, much like we will practice today. It is a mercy that breaks across boundaries and borders, a mercy that reaches out. But it is also a mercy that is willing to get messy. It is a mercy that unites the vertical dimensions of God’s divine love with the horizontal axes of human life.

Let me explain that.

Following World War II, John Mackie, head of the church of Scotland, travelled to Eastern Europe with two other ministers from other denominations. They were visiting mission projects supported by their churches, and stopped in a small Greek village to meet with an Orthodox priest. He was excited to see them, and offered them a glass of expensive wine that he kept for special occasions. The two other ministers, who were from very strict denominations, refused the wine, but Dr. Mackie, the Presbyterian, accepted a glass. He even asked for another, much to the annoyance and consternation of his traveling companions. Later that evening, the two ministers cornered Mackie. “Dr. Mackie,” they says, “do you mean to tell us that you, the moderator of the church of Scotland, an officer of the world Council of Churches, imbibe in drinking?”

Mackie had grown tired of their wearisome fundamentalism, and allowed his Scottish temper to emerge. “No, I don’t,” he told them. “but somebody had to act like a Christian.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>There are many versions of this story. This one was from Michael Yaconelli, *Messy Spirituality*, p. 69  
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