

“Restoring Love”

Matthew 9; 9-13, 18-26

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost/A, June 8, 2008

Lynne M. Dolan

This story from Matthew’s gospel is filled with insiders and outsiders. Whether Jesus is eating with tax collectors or touching the untouchable, he is doing what the good righteous people of his day thought unthinkable. Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners without a second thought. He allows an unclean woman to discreetly touch him and offers her nothing but compassion. While traveling to his next destination, Jesus agrees to go to the synagogue leader’s home to minister to his ill child. In so doing, Jesus crosses two more boundaries, between friend and foe, life and death. Jesus is adept at crossing boundaries leaving everyone wondering what is going to happen next.

Jesus lives for the moment. If he is invited to share a meal with outcasts, he goes. If a grieving father insists he resurrect his daughter, he responds. If he sees a tax collector handing his life over to the oppressive political machine, he invites even this unlikely one to follow him instead. Jesus is an in the moment kind of guy. He doesn’t say to the tax collector, “hey pal, when you give up this rotten job give me a call, I have some work for you to do.” He doesn’t judge him or dismiss him, he says, “follow me.”

Tax collectors of those days were not just doing a thankless job no one else wanted to do. They were what we might call “bottom feeders,” feeding off the river bottom of Roman rule. They were not only outsiders they were the most despised members of their community, the very last person anyone wanted to find at their dinner table. Table fellowship of that day was a sacred event. Peter Swanson says, “meals, after all are swaddled in rituals. Observant Jews then and now, understand that meals center the world; they bring stability and joy back into an inhospitable world. But that means one must be careful. Especially under the domination of Rome, with whom one eats.” (Provoking the Gospel of Matthew)

Many people today have lost the reverence of sharing meals together. For the people of Jesus’ society it was not just a social endeavor, it was a sacred endeavor. You were forbidden to eat with those who were unclean or unsavory. You might find yourself no better off than the ones who sat next to you at the table if you were so indiscrete with your guest list. That is the point Jesus was trying to make. We are no better or worse than anyone else. Jesus came to teach us there is no hierarchy of sins that can make us unacceptable to God. There is no job we could have, no offense we could make, no illness we might contract, that would keep us from sitting at the table. Such myopic boundary keeping is lost on those of us who think more like Jesus than the Pharisees.

First Jesus openly dines with tax collectors and sinners. Then he allows a woman who has been bleeding for many years to secretly touch him. Even she knows that Jesus will not turn her away if she finds a way to get close enough to him. She does not want conversation or a place at his table. She doesn’t even want him to know she is there. She

knows all she has to do is get close enough to find his fringe. After all this time, she just needs a little something to hold onto.

It is that way for anyone who has been shut out, denied justice, or kept away from that which will make them whole again. You can make it through; you can persevere if you have even the tiniest thing to hold onto. Other people may define what is acceptable and what is not, who is acceptable and who is not. They may even think they know what sin is and who is the sinner. Jesus comes to make new rules. His most important rule is love your neighbor. Remember the focus for Matthew is precise this, how well did you really love your neighbor? We live by the rule of love. If what we do is not loving, if what we do is not life affirming, if what we do can not be seen as compassionate, we must not do it. Jesus breaks apart our old understandings of sin, of what and who is acceptable, and what constitutes community.

Finally, a desperate father comes to Jesus seeking a true miracle for his daughter. There is no reason to believe this child is not dead. This man is a leader in the synagogue and he does not care if he is crossing the line by coming to Jesus. Jesus on the other hand, would never withhold mercy from anyone who was suffering. After all he has just told them, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice, for I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

People who need salvation surround Jesus. In this passage salvation looks more like healing and restoration to life and community than our traditional notions of salvation that can be earned by proper learning instead of proper living. Jesus responds lovingly to each request and then says follow me. He does not hand you a manual and tell you there will be a test in two days. He does not ask you to recite the Ten Commandments or understand the writings of the prophets. He simply invites anyone who is willing to follow. If you accept his invitation, you will find out what you need to know along the way. It may be in sharing a meal. It may be as you witness him inconspicuously healing the outcast. It may be at the bedside of one who has died. If we stick with Jesus, we will find out what we need to know sometimes in what he says, but more often in what he does.

There are no boundaries we can erect, no rules we can devise or a guest list too exclusive that would keep Jesus from do God’s will. Jesus came to dismantle whatever does not make for loving, caring compassionate community. Those who understand Jesus step aside in awe; those who don’t accuse him of wrongdoing. To those who misunderstand his motives he says, “those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” None of us likes to be put in our place or told we are the sinner or the sick. For Jesus, this is not so much an accusation as it is an invitation.

Jesus wants everyone to be at the table, saints and sinners alike. He wants everyone to live to his or her fullest potential. Jesus excludes no one, including the Pharisees. They have excluded themselves. Jesus is ever giving, ever loving, accepting and embracing of even the most offensive members of the community. In today’s world, the voice of exclusion gets far more attention than the voice that speaks of love and acceptance. Who are the ones we would like to keep away from our table? Are there people we think of as

sinner whom Jesus would not? Imagine what it must have been like for Jesus. He was the only voice speaking against the system. His followers did not yet understand nor did they have the courage to speak in one voice, so he took on the authorities himself. He lived faithfully doing the will of God who sent him. There was nothing he wouldn't do, no matter the cost.

Think of the good we might do if we spoke in one voice. Imagine how large our table would be if everyone truly felt welcomed. Jesus' ability to invite everyone still amazes me. We have not yet gotten to the place where the boundaries are as fluid as they were for Jesus. We still want to keep certain people out, those who live a certain place, dress a certain way, love a certain kind of people, have a certain color skin or speak a certain language. This happens sadly among people who even call themselves Christian.

Any boundary that keeps us separated from our brothers and sisters are not of God. If we are truly disciples of Jesus, there are no boundaries. There are no limits to the love, grace and mercy we both receive and share. Jesus challenges us to learn what it means when he says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." I want you to love each other. I want you to understand each other. I want you to sit together at the table and discover what you have in common. I want you to bear each other's burdens. I want you to trust you have the power within you to heal each other's brokenness. I want you to know these boundaries that keep us apart need to be dismantled.

I spoke a few weeks ago about engaging in a sacred conversation on race. Since then the political landscape has become clearer. It is no longer speculation that we will have the opportunity to vote for an African American candidate. It has become a reality. I remember thinking when Barack Obama announced his candidacy that there was a part of me that was frightened for him. I was afraid that someone in this country would be filled with enough hate to do him harm. Since that time, we have witnessed the outpouring of enthusiasm wherever he goes. There are enough people, from many different faith traditions, who understand this is a Kairos moment, touched by the holy, one we will not forget regardless of the outcome. We are witnessing a boundary crossing, history-making event. Therefore, I hope many of you will accept the invitation to gather in September for this sacred conversation. It will be a wonderful opportunity to restore love, to heal old wounds, to be honest about our feelings, seek forgiveness and to move forward.

Jesus was not interested in keeping score or following the rules. He was a seize the moment kind of guy. His time was short and there was always one more person to heal, one more lesson to teach, one more opportunity to do God's will. Even when we are uncomfortable with what he says or the places he invites us to go, we need to take a chance and follow. With a fringe of hope and faith the size of mustard seed we can still change the world. May it be so! amen