

## 6.7.26 Sermon on Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

I can remember a time in seminary where I was really struggling – I was struggling with depression and anxiety, I was struggling with my identity, I was struggling in a relationship of sorts, and one of the things that I felt was unseen. While I don't think that was actually true, looking back, at the time I felt profoundly invisible. Unknown. I think for all of us, we know what it is to need to be seen. To be known – not just noticed in passing, or glanced at for a moment, but truly seen. Most of us know what it feels like to be overlooked at some point in our lives. We know what it is like when people make assumptions about us before they even know our names.

And maybe that's why many of the stories in Matthew's gospel are powerful – because in each of them, Jesus sees someone that others had learned not to see.

The passage this morning begins with Matthew sitting at a tax booth. Matthew was a tax collector, which meant that he was not a popular person in his community. He worked for the Roman Empire. He collected taxes from his own people on behalf of the occupying power. Tax collectors were often associated with corruption and exploitation, where they often collected even more than the imperial tax in order to fill their own pockets. To many faithful Jews, Matthew represented collaboration with this system of oppression. Many would have looked at Matthew and seen a traitor. Most people would have walked right past him, or they would not have a kind word for him.

But Jesus sees something else. As he passes by, he says, "Follow me." He doesn't interrogate Matthew. He doesn't demand that he prove himself worthy. He just sees someone who could be his disciple. And Matthew gets up and follows him. Discipleship begins because Jesus sees Matthew.

The call to follow Christ begins with the sometimes startling realization that we are already known and already seen. Then Matthew tells us what happens next: Jesus is eating dinner with tax collectors and sinners, and the religious leaders are scandalized. They wonder, why does he spend time with people like that? Why does he associate with them? The Pharisees had become experts at drawing boundaries around who belonged and who didn't. They had categories for the righteous and the unrighteous, the clean and the unclean, the insiders and the outsiders.

When they make their accusations, Jesus responds by quoting the prophet Hosea: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." In other words, God is not primarily interested in maintaining boundaries. God is interested in seeing and restoring people. Jesus says that he has come to call not the righteous, but sinners – he has come to call those who have spent their lives being told they are beyond God's love, and he refuses to accept that pronouncement.

And then, in the second part of this morning's reading, Matthew gives us two examples of that that mercy looks like. A leader of the synagogue named Jairus comes to Jesus because his daughter has died, and while Jesus is on his way to help the family, another person enters the story. It is a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years. That's a really long time. Think about what that must be like for her. Twelve years of physical pain, of physical weakness that comes from consistent blood loss. And not only twelve years of pain, but twelve years of uncertainty, twelve years of alienation. Her suffering was not only medical in nature.

In the world of first-century Judaism, a woman experiencing ongoing bleeding was considered ritually unclean. According to the purity laws in Leviticus, anything she touched became unclean, and anyone who touched her became unclean as well. Imagine what living with that condition for twelve years would mean in practice. For more than a decade, people would have kept their distance. Perhaps she had gone through those twelve years without the touch of another human being. It would have been twelve years of wondering whether others even saw her anymore. She certainly wouldn't have been welcome in spaces where everyone else seemed to belong.

And because women in the ancient world often depended upon fathers, husbands, brothers, or sons for social standing and economic security, a chronic illness like this could leave someone incredibly vulnerable. She occupies several layers of marginalization all at once: she is a woman in a patriarchal society, she is sick, she is ritually excluded, and she is likely economically vulnerable.

By the time she reaches Jesus, she has probably become accustomed to being invisible, resigned to a life of being unseen. And yet somehow she believes that if she can just touch the fringe of his cloak, she will be healed. Imagine the courage that took to actually do that. She pushes through the crowd, reaches out, and touches his garment, and immediately, she is healed. But the story isn't finished, because then Jesus turns. He doesn't keep walking, he stops. He looks at her. He sees her. He acknowledges her existence and calls her daughter. Not only is she physically healed, she is now seen. And in a single word, Jesus restores her dignity. She's not a "problem," or a "burden," or an "outcast." She's now "daughter."

And then Jesus continues to the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. When he arrives, the mourners are already gathered. People are already assuming that it's all over. They all assume that death has the final word (which is not unsurprising or unreasonable). But there is another layer in this story – the girl herself is almost invisible in the narrative. We never know her name. She is just "the girl." In the ancient world, children occupied a much lower social position than they do today. They possessed little power, little legal standing, and few rights of their own. And as a girl, her status would have been even lower than that of a boy. To the wider world, she was largely insignificant, and her value came in relationship to her father's status. But she herself was anonymous, just another child among many. But she deeply mattered to Jesus. And so, when he enters the house, he ignores the large crowd gathered, and he takes her by the hand.

That gesture would have been surprising because touching a corpse would also make someone ritually unclean. Just as Jesus allowed the bleeding woman to touch him, he now reaches toward another source of ritual impurity.

Again and again in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus moves toward the people others avoid. He touches lepers, the sick, even the dead. He enters the spaces that others have abandoned. He refuses to let purity laws become barriers to compassion. And as Jesus sees those who are otherwise invisible, life flows outward from him, bringing restoration and new life. Both the woman and the girl are seen. Both are brought back into community. Both are reminded that their stories matter and that they are not over.

I think that is what connects all three stories in today's Gospel, Matthew, the woman, and the girl. All three are people whom others might overlook or avoid. Matthew is dismissed because of his profession, the woman is marginalized because of her illness, and the girl is nearly invisible because of her age and

status. All three of them have been assigned a place by society, reduced to labels. But Jesus sees something else. Matthew is called, the woman is restored, and the girl is raised. And all three of them discover that Jesus' vision is larger than the world's categories.

As the church, we are called to learn that same way of seeing. Following Jesus is not simply believing certain things about him, it means learning to see people the way he sees them. It means noticing the people others ignore and refusing to define people by the labels society gives them. It means moving toward those whom others avoid.

Yesterday, a number of St. Markers worked a table we had set up during the Pride parade and festival. We handed out water and bracelets declaring the wearer a "beloved child of God." We talked and listened to many people throughout the day. And while that may not seem extraordinary, the reality is that many LGBTQ+ people have spent years being told by churches that they are unwelcome, unwanted, or somehow beyond God's grace. Many have experienced rejection in places that were supposed to reflect God's love. Many have learned to expect that when they encounter Christians, they will be judged before they are known.

One of the most important things we can do in our lives as individuals and as a community is to simply show up and be present; to listen and to say through our actions, "We see you." We see you not as an issue, or a debate. Not as a problem to solve, but as beloved children of God.

That is exactly what Jesus does in the passage we heard today. He sees people. He sees the tax collector everyone else avoids. He sees the woman everyone else keeps at a distance. He sees the girl everyone else overlooks.

And then he invites his followers to do the same. The call of Matthew reminds us that discipleship begins when Jesus sees us. The healing of the woman reminds us that Jesus sees those whom society pushes to the margins. The raising of the girl reminds us that Jesus sees worth and possibility where others see insignificance or finality.

And now the same Jesus looks at us and says, "Follow me." "Follow me into places of compassion," he says. "Follow me into places of mercy. Follow me toward those who have been forgotten. Follow me toward those who wonder if anyone notices their pain. Follow me toward those whom others have written off."

Our world is full of people longing to be seen, and disciples of Jesus are called to become people who see. But first, may we know that Jesus sees us. He calls us too. And now he sends us to help others discover that they, too, are seen by the God whose mercy is greater than every boundary, whose love is stronger than every label, and whose life is stronger even than death itself. Amen.