

Hosea 5:15-6:6, Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

### Calling All Sinners

We as a church have just emerged out of quite an extraordinary series of seasons and events, starting with Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. These special days and seasons based on Jesus's life and experience have had us walk through the extraordinary story of God's love breaking into our world, so we can live, aware of the extraordinary reality that the loving Spirit of God remains with us now and always.

The parting words of the risen Christ in the Gospel of Matthew were "Remember, I am with you always." With these words of Jesus still hanging in the air, we are now back in the season called, "Ordinary Time," the Sundays outside the special seasons and festivals. But it doesn't mean boring or business as usual. The word "ordinary" comes from the Latin word ordinalis, which describes numbers in a series. Ordinary Time marks the weeks as they pass. It walks God's children through the rhythm of our season.

On this 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, we are back on the dusty road, following Jesus with his disciples, as his disciples, with Matthew's Gospel as our guide. But now we do so knowing, we have the empowering Spirit in us and with us.

The thing is, when we follow Jesus, we are bound to witness something extraordinary anyways. Today's passage begins with Jesus calling a man named Matthew, a tax collector. We heard a lot about tax collectors when we were following Jesus through Luke's Gospel last year. Jesus seems to have such fondness for tax collectors that we forget how despised they were in those days within the Jewish world Jesus lived.

Tax collectors worked for the Roman government under a system that allowed them to extort money from their own people for their own gain. They were bad, they were hated, and they knew it. In our society today, we may not have the exact equivalent of a tax collector of the ancient Roman world, but I've got a sense that you and I can think of systems in our world that allow the powerful to take advantage of the vulnerable, and our lives are caught up in those systems one way or the other, whether we acknowledge it or not.

So, going back to the tax collectors; the people would have been shocked, if not outright appalled, to see Jesus call a tax collector to follow him. Then, when Matthew the tax collector followed Jesus, he ends up at a dinner where there are many others just like him, tax collectors and sinners. If you weren't one of them but seen with them, you'd be worried about your reputation. Jesus certainly didn't but I wondered if any of his disciples did; I wondered what they thought about having a tax collector as one of them.

The Pharisees certainly took notice and, appalled, asked Jesus's disciples why their teacher was mingling with tax collectors and sinners; what they meant was he shouldn't be doing that; he's a bad example, that teacher of yours.

Jesus answers them himself, first using a proverb that was popular not just within the Jewish circle but also among the Greek philosophers: those who are well don't need a physician but those who are sick. Then, Jesus tells the Pharisees "Go and learn what this means," and quotes the Hebrew Prophet Hosea we heard read earlier: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." The Pharisees were experts on the Jewish Scriptures of Prophets and the Law, and Jesus is telling them, you'd better go and re-learn, because you obviously don't get God who chooses mercy over ritual sacrifice. And finally, in his own words: I came to call not the righteous but sinners."

Given this binary of the sinners verses the righteous, and having been told that tax collectors are sinners, we might jump to the conclusion that the Pharisees are the righteous, even if they are just self-righteous. But self-righteousness is not righteousness. The self-righteous, too, are sinners; they are just too full of themselves to understand how deeply they are in need of mercy themselves.

Because of the binary of the sinners vs. the righteous, we might think Jesus is thinking of the Pharisees when he refers to the righteous, practically saying “I didn’t come for you.” But we are all sinners here, and Jesus is calling all sinners. But the sinner who understands her need responds to Jesus differently from the sinner who is clueless of his own sinfulness. One welcomes Jesus into her life, while the other slams shut the doors on Jesus’s hospitality. But God desires steadfast love for and from all of us.

Our world is full of both kinds of sinners. At any given moment, we are one kind of sinner and the next moment the other kind. When we pray the prayer of confession, we should also ask for forgiveness of our sins that we are not even aware or don’t dare admit. And by “sin,” we are not talking about moral misdeeds and unethical conducts only but any aspects of our being that do not line up with God’s will for God’s good creation, anything that blocks the image of God in which we were created from shining forth from within us.

Jesus is calling all sinners, the repentant and the clueless, all those who are sick, the walking wounded, because God wants to restore us to the wholeness in which God created us. And not only that, God wants us to be in love with God for God is already in love with us.

As we heard earlier, when Jesus was responding to the Pharisees who asked Jesus’s disciples why he was eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus quoted from the section of the book of Hosea that represents hope in the mist of our messy

love affair with God. Jesus said to the Pharisees “Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice,” quoting Hosea.

In the Hosea passage, the words are “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,” and the original Hebrew word is “Hessed,” meaning the enduring loving kindness of God, or the covenantal love. And that’s what God wants from the object of God’s love, us.

But who is Hosea? Hosea was one of the four great Israelite prophets of the eight century BC, overlapping with Isaiah. He imagined the relationship between God and Israel as in a troubled marriage, owing perhaps to the reality from his own life where his wife was less than “faithfully devoted.” He also likens the relationship with God and Israel as the relationship between a caring parent and a rebellious son.

In other words, Hosea, prophesizing during the time when Israel was in religious and political turmoil, was a prophet of the divine-human broken relationship in a cycle that went from betrayal to consequential punishment to restorative forgiveness. ... there is pain felt by God and by God’s people, with God enduring and sustaining the relationship with Hessed, the loving kindness, and desiring the same steadfast love from God’s people. Because when there is love, there is trust, and it takes trust to open our deepest wounds and pains to be touched and healed.

And we see the beautiful wholeness that comes in a relationship of steadfast, covenantal love with God in the stories that follow.

While Jesus was saying that he came to call sinners and not the righteous, to the Pharisees clueless of their own needs, a leader among them come asking Jesus to restore the life of his daughter who had just died. I told you things don’t stay “Ordinary” with Jesus for too long.

It's a painful scene to imagine, a parent having just lost a child. As a pastor, I almost hesitate to mention it, for fear that it might be triggering to some people listening. Death is real; loss is real. We come to church on a beautiful Sunday morning to hear a word of hope, or of comfort, of inspiration and of joy, and yet, when we follow Jesus, he takes us right to where the deepest pain is laid bare, because he follows people's pain. And Jesus asks us, his followers, to stay there with him, to bear witness to the pain and to what God does with it.

This father of the child who just died, did not hesitate to ask Jesus to bring her back to life. He knows he is helpless but trust in Jesus's power to restore his daughter's life, so he asks Jesus, and Jesus follows him.

As he set out to go, a hemorrhaging woman, a literal walking wounded, touches Jesus, and he responded immediately to the woman who touched him, calling her "daughter." Jesus says "your trusting heart made you well."

God knows our love is fickle, we are not able to fully trust in God's saving love for us, but God is patient with us; God's love doesn't run out but keeps pouring over us till our hearts learn to trust it.

After the Unison prayer of confession, I invited you to reflect tenderly on that part of that you believe is keeping you from God, keeping you from being the person you want to be, that part of you that fights God. The part of you that feels lifeless, helpless or hopeless. That's the part God pours God's love right into.

Even as we move into this Ordinary Time, we know our world, our personal world as well as the larger society, is going through some extraordinary strain. Where do you see the world's gaping wound? The bleeding that won't stop. Do you see God's good creation languishing and lying lifeless? We may only experience them as stress and cause to despair, but the God of steadfast love is waiting for us to turn to God with our deepest wounds, our and our world's, so that we may be healed and give the sacrifice of thanksgiving. May it be so.