

Sunday Sermon June 7, 2026

Well Jesus is at it again today – in the Gospel. He’s hanging out with people He’s not supposed to – tax collectors and “sinners.” He’s touching and being touched by the outcast and those pushed aside. Moving on the margins, once again, to remind us that no is beyond the reach of God’s mercy.

Several years ago I had the great good fortune to attend a talk delivered by Bryan Stevenson. Bryan is an attorney who works for the Southern Center for Human Rights. His life’s work is helping to free wrongly convicted death row inmates, those sentenced for a crime they did not commit.

He told the story of what got him into his work. While he was still in law school, he was given an assignment to talk to a man on death row. He was to inform the man that he had received a stay of execution. This meant that the man would not be executed on the date that he had been given.

Bryan recalled that when he delivered this news, the man had tears in his eyes. The man asked Stevenson to repeat what he had just said, to make sure his ears weren’t deceiving him.

Stevenson said that this interaction changed him. This man on death row wasn’t just a prisoner, some faceless criminal. He was a person. What had changed him was something he would call “getting proximate.” Seeing the man’s face. Hearing his story. Being with him. Proximity.

After years of doing this work, years of meeting and “getting proximate” Bryan Stevenson declares that one of the most important things that he’s learned is that “each of us is more than the worst things we’ve ever done.” He learned this by “getting proximate” with people who had previously been just a file or a label.

Jesus got proximate with people all the time, people he wasn’t supposed to have anything to do with. He goes to the margins again in today’s Gospel, calling Matthew the tax collector from his tax booth. This caused the religious folks to complain that Jesus was “eating with tax collectors and sinners,” a great scandal. A respectable rabbi would never eat with a tax collector – they were corrupt and seen as colluding with the empire. “They” were bad people.

But Jesus points out that God is more interested in mercy than sacrifice. God desires compassion more than fancy worship. How would Matthew know God's mercy and love if someone who had it didn't get close to him?

In another Gospel Jesus calls Zacchaeus – a chief tax collector – and eats at his table where Jesus learns that Zacchaeus gives half of what he has to the poor and if he defrauds anyone he pays them back fourfold – twice what the law required?

How would anyone learn that if they didn't sit down at Zacchaeus' table and get proximate? Proximity builds understanding and relationship. It breaks down assumptions and stereotypes. Steers us from seeing them as "those people."

In the second part of today's Gospel, Jesus gets proximate with two others on the margins: a bleeding woman and the deceased daughter of a synagogue official. The bleeding woman touches him. He takes the dead girl by the hand. Both of these gestures were forbidden. They would have defiled Jesus, making him unclean, but in order to show the power of God's healing work, to show that no one is beyond the reach of God's mercy and love, Jesus is touched and he touches: Miracles happen because of proximity.

The encounters healed them, gave them the gift of new life. Being close to the "other," to the outcast, to those on the margins has the power to change and transform both giver and receiver. It's more difficult to "other" people when you're in relationship with them.

Jesus builds relationships with people others have labeled and tossed aside again and again.

Relationship and encounter have the power to change and transform hearts and minds. Reaching out to those the world around us declares "other," bad or even dangerous changes us, brings us together, opens minds, eyes and hearts, offers healing, builds community.

For Bryan Stevenson this happened when he "got proximate" with death row inmates who were just "criminals" before proximity.

If you talk to people who serve at Mison Peniel in Immokalee, or at Pine Manor, All Souls or Gladiolus Food Pantry, they'd likely tell you getting proximate has changed them.

If you've ever met an immigrant, you know they're not all criminals.

Proximity offers the opportunity to see that people who live in very different circumstances than ours are just people like us, and were it not for accident of birth we might be on the receiving end.

I've known people who had negative, hurtful and destructive attitudes about gay people. Then a child, grandchild or friend came out to them and their eyes were opened, heart softened, mind enlightened. Proximity, relationship, changed them.

Sometimes being in proximity with people who live in different circumstances is difficult. That's why is so important to keep coming back to these scriptures where Jesus is moving and healing on the margins.

And there are many wonderful books, articles and podcasts that can bring us in proximity with people we might not otherwise encounter from day to day, people who have very different experiences than ours. This kind of learning builds understanding and acceptance.

Proximity. Jesus in today's Gospel eating with, being touched by, and reaching out to those who were considered the "other" – unclean, even dangerous.

He has relationships with those the world had labeled and dismissed, extending the reach of God's unconditional love for each and every one of God's beloved children to the marginalized and the outcast, and He calls us to do the same.

To live into our baptismal promises to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourself, and striving for justice and peace among all people and respecting the dignity of every human being.

And He shows us that proximity can help to make that happen. May His example inspire us to close the gaps between us, that we might grow in understanding and acceptance. Amen