

Rev. Sarah Carver

Second Sunday after Pentecost

So, Jesus calls Matthew who is sitting in his tax booth. Jesus invites a man who is part of a system of exploitation both of him and those Matthew also exploits to come and follow Jesus. No screening, no asking for a resume because Matthew would bomb any reasonable expectations for a disciple--just an invitation to join Jesus in his ministry, in his life, and at the table. I'm sure Matthew was stunned because these are places where Matthew was most likely not welcome because of his work as a tax collector. Keep in mind that taxes then didn't go to fund roads and education or promote small business as they can today. Instead, taxes funded the lifestyle of the elite and the desires of the empire. And remember that tax collectors could also add their own charges to the taxes and keep that for themselves. In the greater society, Matthew was like a skunk at a picnic: repulsive and most unwelcome. And yet, Jesus doesn't seem to hesitate to invite Matthew in, and Matthew, in return, doesn't hesitate to say yes.

And in his sweeping welcome, Jesus has created a scandal. Jesus has surrounded himself with his disciples who, because of Matthew, may also be suspect, but these other tax collectors and sinners. And he is sharing a meal with them, an act of welcome and friendship going against the age-long wisdom that good people don't do that, they don't keep company with the not good people. But Jesus rejects this wisdom and says to those objecting to his dining with social and spiritual pariahs: "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." Here Jesus is quoting the prophet Hosea who in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE criticized the policies of the King for his alliance with the Assyrians which Hosea saw as infidelity to God. He saw all of Israel being led away from God by the rulers and the priests of the time. And so this call for

repentance of Hosea to Israel includes the words: “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” The admonishment here is that the practices of faith...the worship, the offering of sacrifices, the rites are not sufficient without love for God and love for the work God truly desires: the work of mercy and justice. In Jesus context, it means welcoming those who have been understood as being well beyond the reach of God’s love.

There is an open invitation to discipleship in the kingdom of God. Everyone is called to come and follow Jesus and what’s more, to follow Jesus into suspect places with suspect people. Now this will challenge our sensibilities, but not God’s because I think in the eyes of God, everyone is suspect. There is no one here in our gospel reading who is above reproach: the Pharisees are failing to see that God is welcoming all of these sinners, and the sinners, well, they’ve been up to no good in other ways. But they are all invited to the table. The difference is that these sinners have said yes to Jesus’ invitation. That’s it. And so what we see in this gathering and in Jesus’ words that no one is outside of the scope of God’s welcome and love which is a pretty radical, pretty scandalous message.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes that in accepting a call from Jesus means leaving an old life behind and beginning a new one, and putting ourselves into “a situation where faith is possible.”<sup>1</sup> That is, putting ourselves into places where we are totally reliant on Jesus, on following Jesus, following Jesus into unknown and uncomfortable places in order to learn the “demand and the gift of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> We see this in those who sought healing from Jesus. Without their willingness to be with Jesus, like the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, or the synagogue leader who invited Jesus to his house to heal his daughter, none of these things would have

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *The Cost of Discipleship*. 62.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 63.

been experienced. Without following Jesus, we cannot see such miracles, or be a part of them.

When I was serving on the board of the United Thank Offering, which is a organization that grew out of the Episcopal Church Women's ministry and whose purpose is to fund mission within the church, I found myself traveling a fair amount, visiting various grant sites to see the work the money raised and disbursed was doing out in the world. One year we were in Nashville to visit Thistle Farms, an organization that serves to bring women off the streets to provide shelter, healing, education, and vocational skills. The Reverend Becca Stevens began this work twenty years ago and it has continued, and in fact grown, as other communities have sprung up around the country following her model. What I experienced there was a group of women whose whole selves exuded gratitude for their experience of being saved by being a part of this community. Theirs was a story of God's love that broke into all the hopelessness, and mess and self-loathing that came from their lives and identities as those working and living on the streets and as addicts. We were hosted by Regina who told us her story about how, after years of being on the streets, she was willing to do anything to get out. So one day she threw a rock at a police car and ended up going to jail for two years. That was fine for her, but when her time ended and she got out she had nowhere to go. As she was trying to figure out what to do, someone told her to call this place called Thistle Farms for somewhere to stay and get off the street. And oh, it was run by this priest. Regina was suspicious and as she was telling her story, she noted that she didn't think that this priest and she would have anything in common. At this point, Regina thought she was nothing more than a sinner—which, by the way, that's not the language she used. She believed that there was nothing lovable, valuable, or worthy about her. But where else could she go, she thought? Who else

would want her? So she went, there was a bed available, and she was given a key to the house—an act of trust that absolutely floored her. She still wasn't convinced or settled. And then she met Becca, who Regina described as the skinny priest wearing daisy dukes, a mid-drift top and standing there with a baby on her hip. Regina pointed out to Becca that she wasn't what she expected—which was the black tab collared shirt and all. She went further to say that there was a line dividing priests and prostitutes. In other words, she was saying that one of them didn't belong there: guess which one? Becca said back: “if there is a line dividing [them], it is a thin one.” And with that, Regina entered into a new life where now, many years later, she could share her story without shame, but as a testimony to the power of God's love to change lives and re-member women who, like Regina who had forgotten that they are worthy and loved and that they belong with us; and that their humanity, their flesh and bone—the very things used and denigrated on the streets, is no less worthy, no less beloved, no less human than anyone else's. Regina found a home, in God and in others and in herself.

Regina's incredible story is possible because God in Christ is going into suspect places, with suspect people, and changing everything. For all of humanity, when we hear the call and say yes to following Jesus into such places, with our own suspect selves, we become not only witnesses to such newness, witness to healing such as Regina's, we become witnesses to and participants in our own salvation through experiencing what is possible in God in others and in ourselves. And so the next time you see or encounter someone whom you think might be on the outs with everyone, or God; someone particularly distasteful or broken...remember that God sent his Son into the world to invite them into the Kingdom of God and that if there is a line between the righteous and sinners, it's a pretty thin one.