



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

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St. Mark's on the Campus
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TODAY'S GOSPEL PASSAGE reminds us that Jesus isn't known for the company he keeps. Or at least if he's known for his company, it isn't because he can drop impressive names in conversation! There's Yahweh, of course; but as Jesus' life shows, and the life of the prophets before him shows, hanging out with God will sometimes lead us to very uncomfortable places. The other company Jesus keeps isn't always deemed as any more desirable.

There's Matthew, of course, a tax collector, one of the most despised kind of men in the Roman empire because they're known for collecting more money than they should and pocketing the extra cash. We don't know if Matthew does this, but his profession means that he's painted with the same brush as his colleagues.

We also hear in the gospel this morning that Jesus and his disciples break bread with other sinners – others who “miss the mark” toward which God asks us to aim. The Pharisees in this story wonder about that because, after all, Jesus calls himself a Rabbi, a teacher of the faith, just as they do – and some of them would be reluctant to hang out with disreputable folk.

The passage goes on to describe how Jesus also cares enough about women in a highly patriarchal society that he gently holds up the faith of this woman as she reaches out, touches his garment, and is healed by her faith. And he doesn't scold her for touching him, which according to purity laws would have made him unclean along with her because of this bleeding problem she has. It underscores what's going on in this passage: Jesus would rather be identified with one who needs to be healed than be seen as remaining pure himself. You'll notice that the leader of the synagogue whose daughter Jesus is about to resurrect from the dead -- he doesn't care about Jesus' state of purity at all; when push comes to shove, when we're in a bind, most of us can keep our priorities straight.

These stories about boundaries breaking down among the people Jesus hangs out with remind me of a saying one of my former senior wardens was fond of: “The church is not a museum for saints; it's a hospital for sinners.”

That sentiment could be lifted directly out of this gospel passage:

When Jesus hears this group of Pharisees asking about why he eats with sinners, he responds: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. . . . I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

That's a powerful and profoundly touching statement when we realize that this gospel is attributed to Matthew, that this saying falls right on the heels of the description of Matthew's call, and that the statement takes place in the context of a dinner in which Jesus is eating with tax collectors like Matthew as well as other sinners.

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. . . . I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

It's as if Matthew himself is reminding all of us who gather around the table with Jesus week after week that we need Jesus; and we don't need him because we're so wonderful. We need him because even if we are wonderful – which we are -- we're not completely wonderful. Not yet.

Jesus calls us around this table because we need him no less than Matthew and those other sinners do – because we need him no less than the leader of the synagogue and his daughter; no less than that desperate, unclean woman who sneaks up behind him and touches his cloak, believing with all her heart that it's going to make a difference in her life.

There's a haunting reality about this passage. The phrase “he got up and followed him” occurs twice. Once is when Jesus calls out to Matthew and Matthew gets up and follows Jesus, compelled by the call of God moving his legs as well as his heart. The other person who gets up and follows is Jesus himself. When the leader of the synagogue comes to Jesus pleading for his daughter's life, Jesus “gets up and follows him” to the leader's home. He, too, is compelled by that inner call of the Creator within his soul.

Jesus calls, and Jesus responds to our call when we need Him, as God works continually to draw us together. That's a statement of pure faith. There's not always proof of Jesus being with us at this or any other meal. It's only the heart of faith that knows bread and wine to be more than bread and wine; it's only the heart of faith that believes the grace conveyed to us in this sacrament and in the community of fellow believers can make a difference in our lives.

Of course each time we experience such transformations, it strengthens our will to believe. Sometimes those transformations are dramatic and physical; they turn mocking laughter into awe, as happens with the crowd at the synagogue leader's house. Sometimes transformations are so internal that no one but ourselves realize they have happened. And sometimes we ourselves don't even realize how much we need to be healed, although others can sometimes see it more clearly than we can.

This life of following Jesus means we face things about ourselves that can be hard to face. But we don't face those realities alone. We face them with each other, and more critically, we face them with Jesus, as together with him, we gather around the table of the Lord and reach out for healing.