

Sunday August 11, 2019
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First Lutheran Church Aitkin

Matthew 9:9-13

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen

One day a person rushed into his pastor's office and said, there is man who you have to meet and we have to make him a member of our church. The pastor got in the car and they drove into the city, into a part of town that was no longer very nice. They parked near a run down apartment building and entered it. They climbed three floors and went down the hall, knocking at a door. The man inside said come in and they entered a sparsely furnished room with a mattress on the floor. The man was scruffy looking, with clothes that needed to be washed and a bit tired looking. The church member turned to the pastor and said, this is the person I told you about; he needs to become a member of our church. He has never belonged to a church and doesn't know much about God. We have to make him a member!

What would we think? The man needs a bath, he could use some new clothes and he doesn't look too inviting. And we may be put off by him or scared of him. Of course, we would think this but make sure not to say it out loud. We might agree he needs to be a member of our church but we may not really want to sit too close or talk very much with him.

All this being said, or thought, what is the one, the one basic reason we should help this person become a member of the church? It's because he needs to experience the presence of God in his life! That's what our Gospel lesson today is about, experiencing the presence of God.

Jesus, after being baptized spent forty days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. When he returns he says this, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." Or, the kingdom of God has come to you. Jesus understood himself to be bringing the kingdom or presence of God into our lives. So as Jesus walks along he sees a man named Matthew sitting and working at a tax booth. Jesus says, follow me and Matthew gets up and follows Jesus. What power and sense of command Jesus must have had.

Then the scene changes and we are told that Jesus, his disciples and sinners and tax collectors are at dinner. We aren't told whose house it is. It could have been Matthew's or it could have been Jesus'. Jesus grew up in Nazareth but moved and had a house in Capernaum on the west end of the Sea of Galilee. I choose to think it is Jesus' house and it is not the first time that sinners and tax collectors have gathered in Jesus' house.

But the Pharisees, those people dedicated to living out the 600 plus rules of Judaism see this and ask Jesus' disciples why their master eats supper with sinners and tax collectors? These people are bad and good people don't associate with them. What is Jesus thinking, doing this?

Jesus hears this and responds that the healthy have no need of a doctor. That's true isn't it? How many of us get up in the morning, say that we feel fine and then decide to go see the doctor because we feel fine? We don't. Then Jesus adds a quote that we heard in last week's Gospel from Matthew 12, "I require mercy and not sacrifice", from Hosea 6:6. What is the loving thing to do, God is requesting of us, not just paying attention to rituals or going through the forms of correctness. These people need to experience the presence of God and that is why I eat with

them, Jesus is saying. He adds, I have not come to call the righteous but sinners. Sinners, those people that do not live their life in submission and obedience to God's will. Sinners, those people that have been told they have no place in God's kingdom or family and have given up any hope of God in their life. Sinners, those people that others place in categories below them and stay away from them.

The Pharisees thought they were in God's presence and that God was very pleased with them. But their egotistical attitude, satisfied with doing the outward commands of God, that led them to a proud and pious attitude, were not close to God either. Their pride in being the "good people" got in the way of experiencing God. They thought they were the hot shots and the others were duds. They were sick but didn't know it!

But Jesus called Matthew, a tax collector and ate with tax collectors and sinners because he wanted them to experience the presence of God in their life. These people needed to know that God loves all people and wants them to know they are known by God, accepted by God and cared for by God. Jesus wanted all people to know that God had come to them in Jesus the Christ and they were to allow Jesus to be God to them. When Peter saw the great haul of fish that Jesus commanded, he said, depart from me for I am a sinful man. He was overwhelmed. In the song, "How great thou art", we say, "O lord my God when I am in awesome wonder", we get an impression of the power of God in our life. In Psalm 8 we read, "When I consider the heavens the works of thy hand, what is man that you care for us?" In the presence of God we are awed, we are overwhelmed, we are humbled.

I did a word study on the word sinner in Greek which is harmartolos. There is an excellent study written by a German pastor who noted that Jesus never asked anyone to confess their sins. John the Baptist did, but not Jesus. Instead Jesus came to people as the presence of God and let the person respond as they would. Jesus was concerned about people's sins, but instead of asking them to confess their sins and be forgiven, Jesus asked them to experience God's loving, caring, accepting, encouraging nature and to submit to him or "follow him". To follow is to leave behind the old life and bask in the love and lordship of Jesus in our life.

It is the aim of Jesus and now the church, to set people before the total reality and presence of God. And then to mediate to them the total fellowship with God.

We have our ideas of what God wants in God's kingdom, the church, the community of believers. We might be wrong. Apparently God wants all kinds of people to experience the presence of God and be changed by that experience. Does that happen all at once? Sometimes. Does it happen slowly over time? Sometimes. As members of the church we need to say this phrase to ourselves and about others: please be patient with me, God is not done working with me yet.

As the church, can we work, pray, help to present the presence of God to ourselves and to others? Can we see that our work or goal is to help people come into this community of believers and find that they have encounter with God? That's a pretty big order. But it is what Jesus did and how can we do anything different?

Let us act, share, engage with others so that God's presence can be experienced and we along with them may more fully follow Jesus in a life filled with God's nature—as Jesus' disciples did!

