

Looking Down

Here we are in June. April fifteenth has come and gone. For most of us, tax season is over. But have you heard about the IRS's new form for simplifying our tax returns? There are only four lines on it:

Line one: What was your income last year?

Line two: What were your expenses last year?

Line three: How much do you have left?

Line four: Send it in.

It's been said that all humor is based on truth. And it's been said that there are some things you need to laugh about so you won't cry about them. Do you feel that your tax burden is unjust? If you do, then you can probably sympathize with the feelings of those in first-century Israel, who were required to pay taxes to the despised imperial Roman forces that occupied their nation. The Roman governors hired Jewish citizens to collect revenue owed. But these tax collectors would routinely take considerably more from each family than the amount due to Rome, and then pocket the difference. Therefore, it doesn't come as a big surprise that in the time of Jesus' ministry, tax collectors were loathed and hated.

So that's the background for the first of three stories we hear in this Sunday's gospel reading. Jesus is heading out from his home base in

Capernaum, walking along, when he comes to a tax collector's booth and sees Matthew there. Now you may be wondering: is this the same Matthew to whom the Gospel is attributed? For a variety of reasons, scholars don't think so.

But what really matters here is Matthew's relationship with Jesus, just as what matters most in your life and mine is relationship with Christ. And here are Jesus and Matthew at the tax collector's booth: Jesus in a standing position, and Matthew, seated. To meet Matthew's eyes, Jesus has to look down at him. And he says only two words: "Follow me."

What do you suppose Jesus *sees* in Matthew? Could it be that when everyone else looks at this man, all they can see is a reviled tax collector, but when Jesus looks at him, he sees what's in Matthew's heart? He sees what God alone can see.

This may be the first meeting of Jesus and Matthew. We're not told that the two have met before. What we *are* told is that Jesus invites and Matthew follows. Just like that. Immediately—leaving behind his workplace, his livelihood, his former way of life. Matthew follows because, in that moment, he believes. Jesus leads the way to Matthew's home, where they break bread, where they share table fellowship, where they are together in intimate relationship. And Matthew is no longer the same.

The Bible is filled with stories of people—young and old, rich and poor, male and female—whom God has called: people with weaknesses and failings and flaws like Matthew. People like you and me. Thanks be to God, Jesus knows that “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” Jesus has “not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Thanks be to God, Christ looks down and sees you and me, sees something in us that no one else can see, and graciously invites us to follow him. And when we do, we are no longer the same—will never again be the same.

In today’s gospel reading, there’s someone else who encounters Jesus. It’s a story within a story. Have you noticed that Jesus’ ministry often happens when he’s on his way somewhere else? For us who follow him, ministry happens in the same way: with people who are placed in our path.

But on this particular day in the life of Jesus, he’s on his way to a deathbed when an unnamed woman comes up behind him: a woman who has had an issue of blood for twelve years. *Twelve years!* Now there are some things you need to understand about what that means in first-century Israel. A woman with a flow of blood, whether it’s her normal cycle or an abnormal flow, is—according to the law of Moses—considered ritually unclean. Socially unacceptable; cut off from family and friends. Forbidden to worship with the community of faith. For twelve years, she has been a pariah: isolated, ostracized. She and anything she touches are regarded as contaminated.

Yet she approaches Jesus, believing in him and in his healing power. She has to bend or stoop to touch the hem of his garment. So when Jesus turns, he looks down at her, into her eyes, knowing her thoughts. *It's over*, he tells her. *Your suffering has ended*. “your faith has healed you.” The touch makes her whole.

My sisters and brothers, we don't understand the miracle, the mystery of healing. We see in a mirror dimly. We don't know why sometimes physical healing comes in this life and sometimes beyond this life. But we do know that the healing of this great Physician transforms us.

I think that most of us have had feelings of unworthiness at one time or another. Have you ever felt that you didn't belong at church—that you were somehow different—maybe not quite good enough to associate with all those nice church people? That if they knew the truth about you, you wouldn't be welcome? Have you had the mistaken idea that the church is a hotel for saints? Was there something about you on the inside or on the outside that made you feel cut off, ostracized, isolated from the place and the people you needed the most? In your most secret thoughts, do you *still* feel that way, even though you came here today? If so, I have very good news for you. The healing power of Christ puts an end to the brokenness and the alienation and the despair that you feel. The healing power of Christ restores you to the fellowship

and joy of the community of faith. The healing power of Christ makes you whole.

And we know the power of Christ over even death itself. Because we are an Easter people, we read the third and final story in today's gospel passage through resurrection lenses. A government official comes to Jesus in faith, kneeling before him. Once again, Jesus looks down at one in need. This father believes in Jesus' power to bring his young daughter back to life. When they arrive at the family home, the customary hired mourners are making a terrible commotion—playing flutes and wailing. They react with derision and scorn when Jesus tells them the girl is only sleeping. They don't understand his meaning: that in God's kingdom, physical death is not ultimately the end of life, but a temporary hiatus of physical activity—like sleeping.

Jesus looks down at the girl. Have you noticed that Jesus looks down at all three people in this gospel reading? Not looks down *on* them; looks down *at* them. William Willimon shares the story of an artist who created a sculpture for the hallway of a church: a statue of Jesus kneeling before a basin with a towel in his hand. Jesus is looking intently downward, as if he is about to wash someone's feet. When asked why she created a sculpture of Jesus in this posture, the artist replied, "You have to kneel down or be down low already in order to look at the face of Jesus."

Jesus looks down at a young girl brought low by death and touches her hand. He touches someone who has died. Now in ancient Israel, that act of touching a corpse renders one unclean, unfit to be in the company of other people. But Jesus touches her hand—and she arises! *We* knew how the story would end, didn't we?

But the crowd didn't know. When they see her get up, the mocking laughter stops. And the word begins to spread. News of this Jesus travels fast. Everybody's talking. Pharisees raise eyebrows. This Jesus associates and even eats with tax collectors and sinners. This Jesus touches and allows himself to be touched by *females*: by second-class citizens of low social standing. A bleeding woman. A dead girl. This Jesus shows blatant disregard for cultural acceptability, for the Mosaic laws of cleanliness and ritual purity. This Jesus breaks rules, overturns conventions, crosses boundaries, tears down barriers. And he calls us to do the same—to follow him in this way that leads to a cross.

This Jesus speaks God's word through the prophet Hosea, "I desire mercy [steadfast love and], not sacrifice." This Jesus cares little for ritual observance or the status quo, for he has come to proclaim and establish a new order: God's order of measureless grace.

Beloved, we read this Sunday's gospel account of a day in the life of Jesus as an allegory of all that Christ does for us. Just as Jesus saw Matthew that day, involved in business as usual, so too, he sees you and me. He looks into our hearts, sees what's inside, sees our sin-sickness

and loves us anyway. He invites us to follow him, offering nurture and fellowship. When we come to him in faith, he heals us of our brokenness and of our alienation from the household of God. His touch makes us whole. He reaches out his hand and lifts us up out of the death of our previous existence into a present and future life of greater fullness, richness, and abundance than anything we could ever have imagined.

As the psalmist sings, the Lord looks down from heaven. Yet this Christ not only *looks* down to where we are. This Christ actually *comes* down low, to where we are. He comes to be Emmanu-el, God-with-us; comes to walk with us on our journey, calling us to follow him in acts of mercy, healing, and forgiveness; leading us into resurrection life, leading the way to a home where we will feast with him and enjoy him forever.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the blessed Holy Spirit. Amen.