

SERMON
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 10
June 8, 2008

Hosea 5:15-6:6
Psalm 50:7-15
Romans 4:13-25
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

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

All of us have our own conception of what Jesus was really like. We see pictures of Jesus with long silky hair and a kind, loving face. We imagine him in a long flowing white robe sitting amongst the children teaching them the ways of the kingdom. We see him as a gentle shepherd caring for his sheep.

We think of him as a very meek and mild man who sought always to live at peace with everyone.

However, as we read through the gospel accounts, we do not always see Jesus in this light. Instead we read that from the beginning, Jesus deliberately provoked certain groups of people.

He stirred up controversy wherever he went. He intentionally embarrassed and offended people. He did not go along with the status quo. He challenged the way people practiced their faith. He did things differently than what they were used to.

After all, he wasn't crucified for being caring and loving. He was crucified as a political insurrectionist who threatened the powers of his time. He was crucified for proclaiming a radical new way of life that did not coincide with the status quo. He was crucified for suggesting that a new Kingdom was at hand.

I believe that I can safely say that Jesus would have probably been your worst nightmare as a pastor. Think about that for a minute.

The Church Council would have been on the phone immediately with the Bishop saying; "Get this guy out of here before he destroys this place."

In our Gospel reading today, we see Jesus breaking all of the rules. He first befriends a tax collector named Matthew and calls him to be one of his followers. Now you must understand why this would be such a great controversy.

In Jesus' day, a tax collector like Matthew was an outsider, a trader, an outcast. He had dropped out of Jewish society and joined the enemy. Tax collectors in that day worked for the hated Roman government.

Often they obtained their positions by promising to collect more money than the other applicants for the job. Furthermore, they made their living by taking in more money than the Romans demanded. The more they could collect, the more they could line their own pockets. A tax collector, therefore, was despised among the people.

So Jesus not only befriends this one tax collector, but then he has dinner with many tax collectors and sinners. Our Gospel story goes on to say that Jesus heals a woman who had been suffering from bleeding.

Now, she would have been considered by Jewish law to be unclean, yet she touches Jesus. That would then make Jesus unclean. But his healing power goes out to her anyway.

He then raises a girl from the dead, which is not bad, except for the part when he touched her. For to touch a dead person is another way to make yourself unclean. In other words, Jesus is breaking rules all over the place.

So what does this have to say to us? Well, I believe that this story deals with two issues. First, it deals with traditions that have been turned into legalism. Secondly, these words of Jesus deal with the issue of acceptance and hospitality.

Let me first talk about traditions that have been turned into legalism. The author Chuck Swindoll says: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."

You see, traditionalism is holding tightly to a custom or behavior that is being blindly followed or forcefully maintained. It resists change or new ideas. It does not adapt to the surrounding environment.

A few years ago, I read a book entitled; *The Frog in the Kettle* by George Barna. Barna reflects on how sometimes our way of doing things can lead us into a false sense of comfort without seeing the changes that are going on all around us.

He says that it is like the familiar story of the frog and the kettle of water. If you place a frog in a kettle of boiling water, the frog will jump out immediately because it can tell that it's in a hostile environment.

But place a frog in a kettle of room-temperature water and it will stay there content with its surroundings. Then, slowly, very slowly, increase the temperature of the water. This time, the frog doesn't leap out, but just stays there, unaware that the environment is changing.

Continue to turn up the burner until the water is boiling. Our poor frog will be boiled, quite content and oblivious to what is going on – but nevertheless, dead.

Over the last few decades, we in the Church, have continued to operate as though our environment has remained the same. But like the frog, we are faced with the very real possibility of dying because of our unresponsiveness to the changing world around us.

Most Christians do not perceive that the Church is in the midst of the most severe challenge it has faced in centuries. It is evident that we live in a culture that is constantly changing, and it has been for some time.

In 1829, Martin Van Buren, who was then governor of New York, wrote the following protest letter to the President of the United States:

"The canal system of this country is being threatened by a new form of transportation known as Railroad. As you might well know, Railroad carriages are pulled at the enormous speed of 15 miles per hour, thus endangering the life and limb of passengers. The Almighty never intended that people would travel as such breakneck speed."

Well, the world has changed a lot, hasn't it? I wonder what Martin Van Buren would say today if he had to drive in Houston traffic?

In a changing world, Jesus calls us to challenge the traditionalism that destroys God's mission. He calls us to reach out beyond our walls, and open ourselves to the creativity and freshness of God's Spirit.

Jesus did this by going to the sick and the outcast, those who were on the margins of society; those who were considered unacceptable by the religious establishment. Jesus says; "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."

Usually, I meet a few friends at a local pub about once a week. I have been going to the same place for several years now. I have met so many people – so many people who struggle with all of the challenges of life. Once people find out that I am a Pastor, it seems like they always want to come and talk to me about something.

I have had people talk to me with tears in their eyes about how lonely they are. I have had people confess their sins to me. One person recently lost his son in a car accident and was wondering where God is at such a time.

Many times people just try and convince me that they really are good people and believe in God, but just don't go to church. It is as if they feel that I am there to judge them. It's scary that this is how people feel about the church.

I have invited many, many of them to come and worship with us. But few, if any do. I am beginning to understand that inviting people to come to church on Sunday morning may not be the best way to evangelize. Perhaps instead of getting the unchurched to come to church, the church needs to go out into the world to be the church.

The people I talk to definitely feel like outsiders. One person recently told me that he would like to go to church, but he didn't feel like he would be accepted. He had been baptized and confirmed, but had fallen away from the church due to various reasons. He was amazed when I told him that he would be able to receive communion at our church.

There are so many people in our world starving to be loved and accepted unconditionally. Have any of you ever felt like an outcast, an outsider? Either at work or at school, or even at home?

Perhaps I have told you this story before. But I remember when I was in school, we would often play a game called "trench" during gym class. The teacher would have us all line up in a single line. Then team captains would be chosen. The captains were usually the best players.

Each team captain would then begin choosing their team. One by one they would take turns picking who they wanted to be on their team. Of course the best players would always be chosen first. I was usually the second to the last to be chosen.

There was one girl named Ellen Pagel who was always chosen last. She was extremely tiny and frail. She wore thick glasses. Back then people would say that her glasses were like the bottoms of Coke bottles.

I can't tell you how embarrassing it was to stand there as your name was not called. I would pray that just once I could be one of the first one's to be picked. But then I wonder how Ellen felt.

It's amazing that to this day, I can still remember the sick feeling I had standing there while everyone else was chosen. Perhaps some of you have felt that way before.

But, you see, this is where the good news of the Gospel has its power. For Jesus says "The first shall be last and the last shall be first." Jesus accepted those who were sick, those who were outcasts, those who were unwanted.

I would like to close with a story that might help us to understand the meaning of what Jesus did in today's Gospel story.

The storyteller writes:

One day, when I was a freshman in high school, I saw a kid from my class walking home from school. His name was Kyle. It looked like he was carrying all of his books. I thought to myself, "Why would anyone bring home all his books on a Friday? He must really be a nerd."

I had quite a weekend planned (parties and a football game with my friends tomorrow afternoon), so I shrugged my shoulders and went on. As I was walking, I saw a bunch of kids running toward him. They purposely ran into him knocking all of his books out of his arms and tripping him so he landed in the dirt.

His glasses went flying, and I saw them land in the grass about ten feet away. He looked up and I saw this terrible sadness in his eyes. My heart went out to him. So, I jogged over to him and as he crawled around looking for his glasses, I saw a tear in his eye.

I picked up his glasses and as I handed them to him, I said, "Those guys are jerks. They really should get lives." He looked at me and said, "Hey thanks!" And a small smile protruded from his quivering lips. It was one of those smiles that showed real gratitude.

I helped him pick up his books, and asked him where he lived. As it turned out, he lived near me, so I asked him why I had never seen him before. He said that he had gone to a private school before now. I would have never hung out with a private school kid before.

But we talked all the way home, and I helped him carry his books. He turned out to be a pretty cool kid. I asked him if he wanted to play football on Saturday with me and my friends. He said yes.

We hung out all weekend. And the more I got to know Kyle, the more I liked him. Monday morning came, and there was Kyle with the huge stack of books again. I stopped him and said; "Man, you are gonna really build some serious muscles with this pile of books everyday!" He just laughed and handed me half the books.

Over the next four years, Kyle and I became best friends. When we were seniors, we began to think about college. Kyle decided on Georgetown, and I was going to Duke. I knew that we would always be friends and that the miles apart would never be a problem.

He was going to be a doctor, and I was going for business on a football scholarship. Kyle was valedictorian of our class. I teased him all the time about being a nerd. He had to prepare a speech for graduation. I was so glad it wasn't me having to get up there and speak.

On Graduation Day, I saw Kyle. He looked great. He was one of those guys that really found himself during high school. He filled out and actually looked good in glasses. I could tell that he was nervous about giving his speech. So, I smacked him on the back and said, "Hey, big guy, you'll be great!" He looked at me and smiled and said "Thanks."

As he started his speech, he cleared his throat and began. "Graduation is a time to thank those who helped you make it through those tough years. Your parents, your teachers, your siblings, maybe a coach... but mostly your friends.

I am here to tell all of you that being a friend to someone is the best gift you can give them. I am going to tell you a story." I just looked at my friend Kyle with disbelief as he told the story of the first day we met. He had planned to kill himself over the weekend.

He talked of how he had cleaned out his locker so his mom wouldn't have to do it later. He looked hard at me and gave me a little smile. "Thankfully I was saved," he said. "My friend saved me from doing the unspeakable."

I heard the gasp go through the crowd as this handsome, popular boy told us all about his weakest moment. I saw his mom and dad looking at me and smiling that same grateful smile. Not until that moment did I realize its depth.

This is the Gospel. This is grace. This is Jesus Christ. Jesus comes to us in our times when we are down, when we are ignored, abused, laughed at, ostracized, picked on, cast out, left out, passed over, lonely, or just feel that there is no hope.

Jesus picks us up, heals us and sets us free; free to share his love and grace with others. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

How many of you are sinners?

What does it mean to be a sinner?

How many of you have ever been to the doctor?

Why did you go to the doctor?

In our Bible story today, Jesus was hanging out with sinners and sick people, just like you and me.

Why do you think Jesus would hang out with sinners and sick people? Don't you think that he would hang out with people who were smart, healthy, and who followed all the rules?

Jesus says that only sick people need a doctor. And only sinners need someone to save them from their sins. So that means that we need Jesus don't we?

If everyone was perfect and never made any mistakes, then they wouldn't need Jesus. That's why Jesus came and died on the cross. He loved us so much that he wanted to take away our sins.

But there are still people who don't believe that. They don't believe that they are sinners or that they are sick. Therefore they don't believe that they need Jesus.

Do any of you know any people like that? So do I. So Jesus wants us to tell people that we all need Jesus in our lives. Because Jesus will always be with us and care for us.

Let us pray.....

Eric & Jennifer Anderson
Nathaniel

Melody Barnett

Troy Espenlaub

Bridgid Glaeser

Steve & Cheryl Howard
Courtney, Devan

Judy Johnson

Matthew Johnson

Christopher & Vicki Lund

Lee & Isabel Mitchell
George, Travis

Michelle Roller

Sam & Sharon Sledge