

Dare to be Different

Matthew 9:9-17; Philippians 2: 1-11

Thomas Merton said:

“Our joy is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business; and in fact, it’s nobody’s business. What we are asked to do is love. And it’s love itself that will render both ourselves and our neighbours worthy, if anything can.”

Quirky, weird and wonderful. That is what Christians are. Think of any movie about the underdogs and you will get a picture of the type of people that Jesus gathered to be part of God’s ministry in the world. Or, picture any character in a movie that was flawed and seemed beyond redemption – and you will get a picture of who Jesus called to follow him. Jesus said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have come to call not for the righteous, but the sinners.”

Over and over again, people in authority and in leadership question Jesus’ propensity to break rules and to do the unexpected. Jesus sat with, ate with, walked with, and called people who really desired redemption, but who also feared that they could never attain redemption due to their lifestyle and their work. But why? Because *all* children are perfect and wonderfully made by God. Now that does not mean that humans are perfect; we are in fact human and flawed. There is a perception in our culture that only the good and well-behaved come to church; I remember this quite clearly as a teenager as I was called many times a “goody two-shoes” because I went to church. As a minister, however, I’ve encountered daily in this church, mostly outside on the lawn, people who are truly afraid to walk through the doors. For fear – and they told me this – fear of being struck by lightning. They truly do not believe that they are worthy to enter such a beautiful sanctuary. But this is who Jesus would encounter and call.

Jesus was walking down the street and saw Matthew, a tax collector in a booth. Jesus called him to follow and Matthew did. Matthew was called to leave his old life and to follow Jesus, and according to the story, Matthew got up and simply followed him. He didn’t ask why. Or at least, according to the story he didn’t. And he didn’t ask, what’s in

it for me? And the next thing you know, Matthew found himself at a table full of tax collectors and sinners. Maybe at that moment, he finally felt like he belonged. He was at a table with people who were social, moral outcasts. Hearing Jesus say his ministry is not to help those who are healthy can be a bit upsetting for some of us. In that statement, we who have been faithful and doing God's work might take that personally and feel slighted by it. Like we don't matter in the eyes of God. But it's simply untrue. Perhaps what Jesus wants us to learn, or at least acknowledge, is that we're all sinners. And in the end, we are all in need of redemption.

Stephen Butler Murray, a theologian, writes:

“Might it be that sinners recognize their own need, while those who see themselves as righteous are too full of pride, or hubris, to comprehend the need for God's graceful mercy? Declaring oneself as self-righteous before Jesus is to make a claim that no mortal could sustain. We are all sinners. But the sinners who understand their need is different from the sinner who claims to need no assistance. The former welcomes Jesus into their life while the latter slams shut the door of hospitality. Christ holds close those who are in most need of God's mercy *and* recognizes their need.”¹

In many ways, I find this comforting. While others often have unrealistic expectations of you, and sometimes we have unrealistic expectations of ourselves...and when that happens, we are doomed to inevitably fail, usually in an epic manner. We've all made bad choices in our lives. Some which have very little impact and leave very few repercussions and others which can shift our very way of being and change our existence. To follow Jesus – to believe in God – is an invitation to be transformed. Jesus didn't come here on earth to simply add new wine to old wineskins, or to sew a patch of new material onto something old. Jesus came here – it says in one of our creeds – *to reconcile and make new*. As followers of Jesus, we are being offered new life. A new way of being, a new way of seeing.

I've been thinking about this metaphor over the past week: I went kayaking for the first time this weekend using an inflatable kayak. When we finished and went to pack up the kayak back into its bag that it came out of, of course it didn't fit in the way it came out. As a kid, this used to drive me nuts. To the point of craziness. Trying to put a sleeping bag back into a bag or a tent back into its bag was just an exercise in futility and frustration.

But there clearly is a lesson here to learn. I started to think that I would never put new milk into an old milk jug with old milk in it. For what seems obvious reasons: you don't

¹ Stephen Butler Murray, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 118

want to spoil the new milk. Perhaps the lesson for us today is that we need to let the past simply be the past. And recognize that COVID has changed us. It has changed the world, and it has changed the way the church is in the world. Trying to take what we've learned and created and place it back into the old container, or what we once knew church to be, will not serve the purpose that we seek. What caught my attention this week as I was reflecting on the scripture is that Jesus didn't say anything about taking what was old and adding it to something new. He was only adding something new to something old. It reminded me of the trend during COVID where people were learning to make sourdough bread. And how with sourdough bread, you keep a portion of the sourdough and add it to the new loaf. You keep feeding it so it gets that sour flavour. So you take the essence of the dough, to bring it back to life into a new loaf of bread. As I thought about this, I thought about the fact that Jesus did not let go of his Jewish faith and tradition altogether. But nor did he try to fit Christianity into Judaism. He questioned the things of Jewish faith which no longer fit what God was calling him to do and be about. He questioned past practices that just didn't fit. He questioned past assumptions about what scriptures meant, and he chose to be different. He brought the core of his faith and created something new. God wants people to come together, and Jesus wants to break down the rules and the things that divide people, that hurt people, and oppress people. He wants to show humility, a different way of living and treating one another. Jesus lived an authentic and humble life where he simply did what was right, what was true, and acted in unconditional love. We are called to do the same.

We hear this in Paul's invitation to the Philippians where he invites all to be imitators of Christ. To live in a way that others will see Christ in you. Listen again to the first verses of that passage, where it said: "If then, there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being of full accord and of one mind. Do nothing of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility, regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you not look to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

Imitating somebody can be the sincerest form of flattery, when it is done in a way where we learn, change, and grow. I love watching children try and be like their parents. Sometimes in the most embarrassing ways, which is wonderful. Or other adults that they look up to. This is what Paul was getting at. We are not here to be impersonators; we are here to follow and imitate and learn. The hymn which inspired the service today, which we'll be singing shortly, was one that took an old tune, a familiar tune, and transformed the words into something that speaks to the world today. One of the verses that I particularly like is this: "From Jesus, there are riddles. He said the last are first. He tweaked received religion with roles that he reversed."

People perceive Jesus as somebody who was perfect and peaceful. Yet, the scriptures today paint a slightly different picture: someone who was rebellious, someone who challenged people and who broke the rules. Jesus didn't try to fit in; Jesus stood out. Jesus did differently the things that the people he grew up with did, and at times that upset the Pharisees. Instead of wasting his energy on trying to change the minds of the Pharisees, he devoted his time and energy toward people who were ready and willing to receive redemption. He went to the people whose hearts were open to receive the healing love of God.

Healing will come when we stop trying to relive the past. Healing will come when we recognize and acknowledge our humanity, our wounds, our mistakes and our failings. Like it says in "A Song of Faith", the most recent United Church creedal statement:

"The church has not lived up to its vision. It requires the Spirit to reorient it, helping it to live an emerging faith while honoring tradition, challenging it to live by grace rather than entitlement. For we are called to be a blessing to the earth."

To live by grace rather than entitlement is to put God first, and leave behind our own wants and desires. So as we gather in this coming year, as we relearn who each of us is and come to know what is we are called to do, I hope that in our conversation we will try not to fit in what we know of the past, but to bring what is the best part and the core of the past into the future to become who God is wants us to be right now. We need to be a place where there is room for acceptance, a place of diversity where all gifts are honoured. So let us live with renewed purpose of sharing generously all that we've received to build up the body of Christ in the world rather than tear it down. And may we resist the forces that exploit and marginalize. May we help to dismantle systemic injustice, and may we never forget that Jesus offers all of us redemption. For nothing can separate us from the love of God. Amen.