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The Great Physician

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Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26 - As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he 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 not come to call the righteous but sinners."

While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she was saying to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And the woman was made well from that moment. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, "Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread through all of that district.

As a church we walked in the Pride parade yesterday. I think it was the twelfth year that we walked in the parade—we were there for all but the first. 13 years ago, we had a voted to have an inclusive marriage policy after studying, discussing and praying about the matter. Of course, the United Church of Canada has been ordaining openly gay and lesbian clergy now for 35 years. At the beginning these things seemed very cutting edge and controversial. The UCC had deep divisions about it in the early days and this church lost members when we adopted an inclusive LGBTQ2 stance. But over the years it started to be less of a big deal, a little more normalized. Heck, in an election year you'd see all or nearly all of the political parties represented at the flag raising and the parade!

But in the last couple of years this gradual increase in acceptance and tolerance seems to have gone to hell in a hand basket. I don't know about you but I'm shaking my head in disbelief. I suspect the increase in polarization and anti-LGBTQ2 sentiment is in part a bi-product of the global pandemic. We have lived through something that was utterly beyond our control. So much that is going on in the world right now, with inflation and climate change and wild fires, makes us feel out of control. Our human response is to desperately cling to things we *can* control and try to tame and control anything that is out there that we don't understand.

A lot of it is influence from the U.S. which is a deeply polarized and divided country. This year alone in the U.S. 70 anti-gay, anti-trans laws have been enacted. Six states have passed "Don't say gay" laws which prevent any mention of LGBTQ2 in schools, along with a huge increase in book banning. Incidents of targeted violence, bullying and hate speech against

LGBTQ2 and trans people and youth in particular have sky rocketed.

Don't be mistaken to think that it doesn't have an effect. UCLA has documented the increased suicidal ideations and tendencies among the LGBTQ communities. It shouldn't be a surprise to find out there is a correlation between increased intolerance and decreased medical, social, educational support towards LGBTQ2 groups and people on the one hand, and increased suicidal tendencies on the other. But it's sobering to see the statistics.

<https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/generations-transpop-toplines/>

And the cherry on top is that at the forefront of this is the Christian Right. The *Christian Right!* It is people and churches who claim to follow Jesus who are leading the charge.

I find it curious that this is the case. Actually, I find it infuriating that anyone who calls themselves Christian would lead these hate-filled campaigns, but let me start with 'curious' because I have a hard time reconciling their rhetoric with Jesus who they claim to follow.

Last week we talked about the call of the church and some of the scriptures that support that call: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and love your neighbour as yourself.*" Or Micah 6:8: "*What does the Lord require of you but to seek justice and love kindness and walk humbly with your God.*" Or we can follow Jesus' call: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*"

But churches, like people, forget their call. In times of struggle people lean towards control, and religious organizations do also. When Jesus was born the Jewish people were occupied by the Romans and had very little control over their own lives. The Jewish religion was particularly geared towards the rules when Jesus lived. The religious leaders of the time were focused on the rules. There were laws and practices that needed to be strictly adhered to. Many rules — 613 in the Torah! It's not easy following all those laws perfectly, but that's what the religious leaders made an effort to do. And even if they weren't perfect themselves, they did their level best to make sure everyone else tried hard to and were quick to correct those who did not. Jesus seemed to need correcting.

Jesus was not acting the way a righteous person should be acting. There are lots of examples of this through scriptures, like when he and his disciples walk through a wheat field and pluck and eat grains of wheat on the Sabbath— on the mandated holy day of rest. Jesus seems to do a lot of things on the Sabbath that he shouldn't, like healing people. Today's reading highlights Jesus' surprising behaviour with three different encounters.

The first is that he invites himself over to a tax collector's house. It's not just the religious leaders who didn't like tax collectors — no one but the occupying Romans who collected taxes liked tax collectors. They were seen as cheats and thieves because they helped to prop up the occupation, and they padded their own pockets by charging whatever amount they wanted above what the Romans demanded. The second encounter is with an insider — a temple leader— who comes and begs Jesus to heal his daughter, actually to raise his daughter from the dead. And Jesus goes. When he arrives, there are already people there to mark the death, but Jesus goes in anyway. Going near the dead makes you ceremonially unclean. And Jesus would have been unable to go to the temple in that condition until he had done a ritual cleansing. On

his way to bring life to the dead girl, Jesus is interrupted by a woman who has had menstrual bleeding for 12 years. She too is unclean. Her touching Jesus instantly heals her, but makes him 'unclean'.

We understand the idea that being in certain spaces or touching surfaces can cause infection and contamination, and some of the cleanliness laws were clearly an intuitive precursor to what we now understand with science; but they extended beyond the physical to the spiritual. There was a belief that going near or touching that which was spiritually unclean could infect you and make you less worthy, less holy. In each of these stories Jesus deliberately makes himself unclean. He deliberately goes against his own religious norm. Why does he do this?

When the religious leaders criticize Jesus for eating with those tax collectors Jesus says "Learn what this means, I desire mercy not sacrifice." *I desire mercy not sacrifice*. The word *mercy* is that Hebrew word *Hesed*. It is sometimes translated as "steadfast love". It's used in the 23rd Psalm and translated as "goodness and mercy"... "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." *Hesed* is that love that is a strong love ... love that contains commitment and loyalty. It is a fierce love — a love that is able to stand no matter the obstacles, no matter what stands against it.

Jesus does not seem to worry about whether a person is "worthy or righteous" when measured against the rules. Jesus is measuring their worthiness against God's *hesed* — God's steadfast love. That's the measure: God's love! God desires relationship. He desires authentic, abundant life. Jesus is not only reaching out to everyone who needs him ... which is everyone, but also he is calling the religious community back to its true self and true call. Time and time again Jesus signals that his critics have forgotten what religion is all about. True religion has the word *hesed* at its center. God's steadfast love, unfailing love and mercy. There are a few messages for us in this passage of scripture.

When we find ourselves in times and spaces where we feel anxious and like we don't have control over major situations like fires and pandemics, people often turn to the church for that center and that anchor in the storm. This is a good thing. But we who are the church need to embody that anchor as faith and relationship with Jesus — not an anchor in things not changing outside or inside the church. The temptation is to become rigid in tradition or rules so that we have a feeling of "at least some things don't change."

But our comfort, our stability, our peace can't be found in the structure, but in a relationship with Jesus. We offer that relationship through the structure of religion, through the structure of worship, through the structure of church. Jesus didn't come to abolish religion but to call it back to its purpose.

We are called to be like those disciples. In these stories we see the reaction of the religious leaders, but we don't see the reaction of the disciples. I'm guessing they had some reactions because what Jesus was doing was not normal or convenient and in some cases was shocking. But they just follow — even though they probably thought a thousand times "This is out of my comfort zone!" Why were they willing to go beyond their comfort zone? Because they were more focused on Jesus than on the zone markers. Relationship over rules.

While I was wrestling with this sermon I decided to redo the bulletin board in my office to fit in the beautiful poster-congratulations card that so many of you had the opportunity to sign.

One of the things on the board is a little banner, prayer flag, that I created several years ago on a retreat led by former moderator Peter Short. I'm not an artist, but all of us have the ability to produce art. The wonderful thing about art is that it expresses things that you can't express in other ways, like words — (though I try every week!) Anyway it amazes me that God spoke to me through what I created.

God still speaks to me through this prayer flag. It has a small dark square and a little word of invitation above it that says: "come." The rest of the banner is vibrant in colour and life. It has rainbow waves that are wild. It has rainbow sea horse creatures, a vibrant sun or maybe fire ... I'm not even sure. And then there is this large happy fish jumping out of the water. Here's the thing: my life-long temptation is to live in that dark little square that is known and contained, normal and controlled, but when Jesus calls me to follow him, he calls me to step out of the boat and to walk on wild water and into wild and wonderful and uncomfortable (and sometimes scary and full of life) places. That fish is a symbol of the church. We are not called to be contained in a building or a set of rules. *We are called to follow Jesus*, into that beautiful and hurting world filled with people who have been harassed and hurt by the world and by the church.

To those of you who have felt like you don't belong in a church because of your sexuality or gender identity, I want to first say "I'm sorry." On behalf of the Church I am so sorry that you received messages that were anything other than "Welcome, you are a child of God and precious in God's sight." I also want you to know that even when the church fails badly, even when people who call themselves Christian are hateful and hurtful, God will never fail you! God will continue to seek you and invite you and welcome you into a relationship that is filled with love and that will transform you in wonderful ways. God created you beautifully and wonderfully made. And God loves you. God loves you. God loves you!

The Declaration: As a Community of Faith, we affirm the following declaration which is being read in many faith communities during this Pride season. This statement is in response to the rising expressions of hate targeting the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

Our faith community wishes to tell the 2SLGBTQ+ community that you are welcome here. Many voices have been attacking the Trans and Drag communities, and queer people in general. Today, we speak out in favour of inclusion and love. We believe that God loves all human beings, of all sexualities. Too often religion has been used to express hate, which leads to fear and violence. We condemn justifying hate in the name of religion. Today we add our voice to those of many faiths across the country to state clearly that you are welcome here. God loves you. We want you to be safe here where we worship, and everywhere you go. Let us remember that we are all the children of God, who calls on us to love and support each other. We wish you a Happy Pride celebration.

We are called to be the Church:

- to celebrate God's presence,
- to live with respect in Creation,
- to love and serve others,
- to seek justice and resist evil,
- to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.