

***Jesus Revealed:
In Ministry***

Matthew 9:9-13

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With our reading this evening we're jumping right into the middle of an intense and busy section in the gospel of Matthew. Some would even call it turbulent - the expected and normal is tossed around and turned on its head. It's a time of flurried activity coming right after a rich section of teaching about the values and driving vision of the Kingdom of God - what we know as the Sermon on the Mount.

By way of quick overview, in chapter eight the action begins with Jesus healing a leper, then a centurion's servant, then Peter's mother-in-law and a whole bunch of neighbors, and then a demon possessed fellow and then, as we migrate to chapter 9, a paralytic.

There's really never been anything like this in the history of Israel. Yes, they'd witnessed miracles in Old Testament years.

Moses.

Elijah.

Healings.

Powerful acts. But not like this. Not this often.

This is so, well, different.

Then comes the passage we're focussing on tonight.

And, a little while after that passage, yet more healings.

A girl is restored to life, a woman is healed of chronic bleeding, two blind men receive their sight, and a mute one begins to speak.

Indeed, right at the end of chapter 9 the crowd verbalizes what they'd all been thinking,

"Never has anything like this been seen in Israel." (9:33)

No healings in our passage.

In fact, we meet Jesus reclining at a table.

It's supper time.

Never has anything like this been seen in Israel, say the people.

They're thinking of the healings.

The Pharisees are thinking the same thoughts, but not in a praise-worthy manner.

Never has anything like this been seen in Israel, say the Pharisees.

They're referring to a rabbi sitting with rabble at the same table.

Why, everything in the Old Testament rebels against a rabbi with rabble!

Watch what Jesus is doing as he eats with Matthew and the gang.

Compare what Jesus does to the song of Psalm 1:

*Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers...*

Stay **AWAY** from them, Psalm 1 might say.

And the Pharisees would agree.

Don't go ragging on "dem Pharisees", worshippers at Calvin! Because these Pharisees were following solid tradition - the tradition celebrated in Psalm 26:

2 Prove me, O LORD, and try me; test my heart and mind.

3 For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you.

*4 I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites;
5 I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked.*

Oh, these Pharisees weren't the liberals in the religious world.

They weren't like the Sadducees, who would give a generous and loose interpretation to any Scripture passage to make it suit their needs of the moment. The Sadducees weren't convinced there was life-after-death, and weren't all that convinced about the reality of the Presence of a Holy, Righteous and Almighty God, either. Theological liberals, they were. And, if you watch the Gospels, Jesus doesn't really have a great deal of time to devote to them.

But NOT the Pharisees. They truly believed in God. They loved their faith. They protected their spiritual heritage with everything they had. They were serious about their devotion to God.

Yes, they were the committed ones.

And to those committed ones Jesus is willing to direct a lot of time and energy.

These serious and devout believers condemn Jesus for eating with the wrong crowd. Who's in that crowd?

Ah yes, there's Matthew. He's the guy from Wall Street, who lines his bank account with fat bonuses even when the economy is in melt-down all around him - the corporate cheat who doesn't care for the well-being of the nation.

Even worse, he's the guy who'd be willing to sell arms to North Korea or the Taliban, while still working on Wall St. Destabilise North America? Tough. There's a buck to be made!

That's Matthew.

Ah, you may think his life was good. Well.....

Nobody in Israel would have anything to do with tax collectors, Roman-collaborators, double-crossing cheats! So he was terribly lonely.

And nobody in Israel would give him job after one peek at his CV. So career-wise, he was trapped.

And the money? Well, sure it was good, but there he sat in his little booth, in the hot sun, day after day. Without anyone saying "hi." Without anywhere to go. People always angry at you; always avoiding you.

You get used to it, sure.

But grow to like it? Never!

Feel at all good about it? Not a chance!

Flip through chapter eight for a moment, and try to imagine the surprise and the joyful relief of each one of those people whose lives were touched with a miracle from Jesus. They were given a whole new beginning! A new life!

Do you think it was any different for Matthew the white collar criminal when, as Tom Wright puts it, a young prophet with a spring in his step and God's kingdom in his heart comes past one day and simply asks you to follow him?

Don't you think it would feel like a healing miracle?

And -

wouldn't that be exactly what it was?

"Follow me," says the young prophet.

And Matthew responds!

He "got up." Actually, the word is "arose" - **SAME** word as used of the resurrection. Which is what it was for this outcast.

It was a resurrection miracle.

Not just life renewed.

But a whole **NEW** life.

And so - time for a meal together!
And who to invite, but others who were resurrected.
Others that no one else would give the time of day for.
Many other tax collectors and sinners.

Yes, the wrong crowd was there that day at Matthew's house. All the wrong people. Like the sort you meet in chapter 8: a leper, a gentile, a woman, a demon-possessed man.
The wrong crowd.

The serious ones challenge Jesus.
He shoots right back.

"I'm like a doctor," he says. "Yes, I talk about health. But I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't rub shoulders every day with the sick."

Dangerous? Wouldn't it be safer, wouldn't it be far easier to stay away from them; to remain separate from them?

Of course it is.

When you are around the sick, you can catch their disease.

But

you,

the doctor,

still go!

Because it's not about being safe.

It's not about making sure that the serious rituals and sacrifices are pure and properly kept.

It's about life.

It's about mercy.

It's about looking ***outward***, not ***inward***.

It's about welcoming ***in***, not keeping ***out***.

It's about ***making room*** at the table, not ***guarding it*** to keep it pure.

Do you get that, serious ones?

Do we?

Ah yes, do we?

Yes, we - we could easily identify with those serious ones, couldn't we?

The committed ones, the serious ones; yup that's us CRC folk!

Theologically conservative.

Biblically careful.

Serious for sure! Especially those of us here on a Sunday night. Talk about commitment!
Twicers you are. You do your devotions. You tithe faithfully. Kids to Christian school. Wow!

And who are the ones at the table, reclining close to Jesus?

Do we see them?

Who would be the "wrong crowd" at a table today?

Could it be the person struggling with an addiction?

Could it be the illegal refugee?

Could it be the divorcee?
Could it be the man with AIDS?
Could it be the schizophrenic?
Could it be the one with a criminal record?
Could it be the body pierced street person?

Assuming so, reading the passage like this would be, I suppose, motivator enough to be serious, committed apprentices who determine, with a furrow in their brow, to **Reach Out** as the Master did.

But wait.
Perhaps not so fast.
Have a second look at that table.

And -
so -
- who was it that you saw there?

Jesus came to call not the righteous, but sinners.
Really -
- where do we fit?

From Heaven's holy perspective,
where do we fit....
... or not?

Perhaps we're a lot closer to the **MIS**-fits than we care to think.
I know my heart. You know yours.
Perhaps "them is us."
Perhaps we get to pull up a chair beside them.
Like them.
Us.

Maybe the words about a new way of doing business in the Kingdom
the words about mercy
maybe those words are for us, too!

Maybe the welcome of Jesus for the Mis-Fits is a welcome for us!
Maybe Jesus wants to eat with us!
And, after dinner, push back the plate, recline back in the chair, and just spend some time with us.
Could you imagine that?
That the Great Physician reaches out
and we are welcomed in.
Not excluded.

Take some time this week to imagine that.
Imagine yourself hosting a dinner party for Jesus.
What would you serve?
And,
who might you invite?

For whom might you intentionally pull up a chair, and hold out a hand to draw them in and welcome them?

That's your "take away" exercise for the evening.

Imagine that scene.

You.

And the others - whoever they are.

And Jesus.

And then, perhaps,

after we can read this passage seeing ourselves there, in Matthew's place, and seeing it clearly,

I don't know, but perhaps then we can begin to think about some concrete ways that we can and do practice welcoming to the table here at Calvin Church. And perhaps some new ways we can add to the repertoire.

Just a thought.

What do you think?

"Follow me" are the words of Jesus.

Matthew did. Hey, once you've been welcomed by Jesus, you want to stay close. And, over time, Jesus' actions became Matthew's.

In about 10 minutes we'll leave.

Will we follow?