

Drive By or Sit By

Isaiah 58:6-8 NIV ⁶ "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? ⁸ Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

Matthew 9:9-13 NIV ⁹ As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. ¹⁰ While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" ¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Drive By or Sit By

Today's gospel lesson raises some interesting issues. When we look at the setting of today's reading, we notice that back at the beginning of chapter nine, some folks brought a paralyzed man to Jesus. Taking note of the faith of the people who carried the man's bed, Jesus told the invalid that his sins were forgiven. There's no mention of repentance, or confession, or a request for forgiveness.

Today's reading begins with Jesus spotting Matthew at the toll booth, and inviting him to "come follow." When I was young, the calling of the apostles was always told as a sort of miraculous event. It was as if Jesus walked up, snapped his fingers, and Matthew jumped up and came running. It was like Matthew instantly saw an invisible halo around Jesus' head and he recognized Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God in that instant. Of course, this never explained why later on the disciples often seemed confused about both the identity and the teachings of Jesus. Perhaps this account is easier to picture in our minds when we remember two things. First, tax collectors worked for the forces of the Roman occupation. They were traitors and social outcasts among the Jewish people. Second, the Jews had great respect for learning, especially for the rabbis who taught the law and traditions of the sacred scrolls. To be the student of a rabbi was a great honor. So, by leaving his job as a customs agent and following Jesus the teacher, Matthew changed from social outcast to respectable disciple.

It's important to take note of what does and doesn't happen in this story. There's no indication that in order to be worthy of being called to discipleship, that Matthew first repented of his career as a tax collector. There's no mention of confession or asking for forgiveness. No, Jesus approached Matthew. Jesus initiated the relationship and offered discipleship.

After this, Jesus and his disciples were eating and there were many tax collectors and sinners eating with them. We know about tax collectors. Who were the sinners? Perhaps they were people like bankers, whose profession was a violation of the law because they charged interest. Maybe they were people who were lax in observing the food laws, the tithes, and the ritual baths. Maybe they were people who were guilty of flagrant moral offenses like the woman who was caught in the very act of adultery. In any event, they weren't invited to dine with Jesus because they were worthy. They were invited because the graciousness of Christ included them.

When you were in elementary school and junior high, do you recall how it was really important where you sat in the school lunch room? You didn't want to sit at a table with certain kids because they had "cooties." And there were some kids you wished you could sit with because they were cool – they were good looking, popular, and wore neat clothes. When I was a teenager, it seemed like I was constantly being told that "Bad company corrupts good morals," and "You're known by the company you keep." I was always being reminded to be careful about who I hung out with, because it could damage my reputation,

and bad morals would rub off on me. The Pharisees had that same outlook, and so they were appalled at who Jesus was eating with. It's a bit like spotting the preacher's car parked in front of a strip joint.

So, who are the "tax collectors and sinners" of our time and culture? Who are the socially and morally marginalized today? Prisoners, AIDS victims, dope dealers, pimps, prostitutes, politicians caught in sexual misbehavior, those who file fraudulent Medicare claims, those who run financial Ponzi schemes. We probably add to that list folks who seem to be lazy, who cuss too much, drink too much, go to church too little, and people who are mean spirited.

Since we don't fall into any of those categories – at least not too deeply – we count ourselves among the righteous. Then we read that Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Since we're in pretty good shape on this righteousness stuff, should we all just shout "Amen" and go on over to the Woman's Club for Sunday lunch? Maybe before we head on over to the feed trough, we need to think a bit about sin and righteousness.

We usually think of sin as when people do bad things. That's true, but that's an inadequate understanding of sin. Sin is a term from archery. It means to miss the mark. Paul is talking about this missing the mark when he writes, ^{NRS} **Romans 7:19** "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." Because he doesn't always do what he aims to do, Paul is a sinner. Sin is about doing bad things – and about failing to do good things.

What does it mean to be righteous? Certainly, it's about what we do. We've all heard someone described as righteous – because he or she is at worship come rain or shine, teaches Sunday School, gives to the building fund, and always brings a great casserole to the covered dish dinners. The Pharisees were a lot like that. They were very careful to observe all of the rules about worship, sacrifices, prayer, tithing, and other religious practices. Righteousness was mostly thought of in terms of their relationship to the temple and personal morality. Today, we think of righteousness in terms of our morality and our involvement in the church.

But we can't stop there. Jesus told his critics, "go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" Jesus is quoting the prophet Hosea. The prophets preached about this a lot. Amos taught that God was tired of only seeing worship services and hearing hymns and so God said, "Go and make justice flow over the people like a river." The prophet Zechariah preached that what God wanted was for us to show mercy and compassion and to not oppress aliens, widows, and orphans. There's more to righteous actions than showing up for church.

The Psalmist tells us that God cares little for sacrifices as compared to a contrite heart (51:16-17) and that God really wants his will to be written in our hearts (40:5-8). While there's the surface level of practice, the level of what we do, there's also the heart level, the deeper level of vision and motivation. When we looked at the stages of faith a few weeks ago, we saw that stronger, deeper faith is when love saturates our lives, when we love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. (Matt. 22:37-39) Put another way, it's when we have the mind of Christ.

Religious practices are the outward expressions of this internal love. But those actions can become separated from the motivation of love. We so often see righteousness as a matter of keeping our distance from sinners - instead of understanding it as love of God and our neighbor. We think in terms of withdrawal and retreat instead of involvement. Religious practices can become ends in themselves. They can be duties and good works on a checklist. Worse yet, they can be driven by love of ourselves and our own self-affirmed goodness. They can be proclamations of self-righteousness.

Like the Pharisees, we welcome repentant sinners. We're happy to associate with people who somehow deserve our help. But we have a hard time with folks if it seems like they may not be really completely sorry for their mistakes. We want to be sure that they're really poor, really hungry, really repentant, really want to change.

One of the striking things in today's gospel lesson is that Jesus doesn't seem to be concerned with qualifying people to receive his attention. Jesus sought out sinners. He forgave people who didn't even ask. He called and associated with people that lacked all the ordinary qualifications of piety, rectitude or

deservedness – it was all based on radical grace. Because of his mercy, Jesus included those who had been excluded. He hung out with social and moral outcasts.

But Jesus separated himself from the righteous – that is, those that thought of themselves as righteous – because those are the people who see righteousness as practice rather than motivation and vision. Being around Jesus and describing yourself as righteous is writing a check that you can't cash. We're all like Paul, trying to do good – and missing the target. We try to avoid evil, but sometimes we mess up. None of us is thoroughly righteous.

The good news is that the church is a school for sinners, people who miss the mark, not a society or club of saints. In fact, you can't be too sinful, too bad, too low to deserve or receive help from the church or from God. No one is beyond the reach of God's mercy! Because of his mercy, Jesus included the excluded. He associated with social and moral outcasts. Those are the footsteps where we need to be walking. The question is, who do we pass by? Who do we overlook? Who do we ignore and drive past? On the other hand, who do we sit with? Are we still trying to sit with the same people we did in the school cafeteria? Or is love moving us to sit with those who aren't like us, who can't do anything for us, the needy and the undeserving who could use some love? Just this morning, I received an email with a short poem that speaks to all of this.

I was shocked, confused, bewildered,
As I entered Heaven's door.
Not by the beauty of it all,
Nor the lights, nor its decor.

But it was the folks in Heaven
Who made me sputter and gasp - -
The thieves, the liars, the sinners,
The alcoholics and the trash.

There stood the kid from seventh grade
Who swiped my lunch money twice.
Next to him was my old neighbor
Who never said anything nice.

Bob, who I always thought
Was rotting away in hell,
Was sitting pretty on cloud nine,
Looking incredibly well.

I nudged Jesus, "What's the deal?
I would love to hear Your take.
How'd all these sinners get up here?
Did God made a mistake?

And why is everyone so quiet,
So somber - give me a clue."
"Hush, child," He said,
"they're all in shock.
No one thought they'd see you."

JUDGE NOT!!

Hosea 6:4-6 NIV ⁴ "What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears. ⁵ Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets, I killed you with the words of my mouth; my judgments flashed like lightning upon you. ⁶ For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.

Amos 5:21-24 NIV ²¹ "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. ²² Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. ²³ Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. ²⁴ But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Psalms 51:16-17 NIV ⁶ You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. ¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Zechariah 7:9-10 NIV ⁹ "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. ¹⁰ Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.'

Psalms 40:5-8 NIV ⁵ Many, O LORD my God, are the wonders you have done. The things you planned for us no one can recount to you; were I to speak and tell of them, they would be too many to declare. ⁶ Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. ⁷ Then I said, "Here I am, I have come-- it is written about me in the scroll. ⁸ I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."