

Sunday, July 11, 10

SCRIPTURE: Mt 9: 9-13; 18-25 page 9

- Today's scripture is from Matthew and a major theme in Matthew's gospel is liberation.
- According to Matthew, God has sent Jesus as a new Moses, to liberate us from slavery, from bondage, to lead us into right ways of living.
- In today's scripture Jesus "liberates" 3 people, each bound by remarkably different circumstances a tax collector, a woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years and a girl who is dead
- Each one is considered to be ritually unclean, cut off from life in community and life with God:
- There isn't time in a single sermon to deal with all the issues of healing miracles and raising the dead.
- What is important is to see that Jesus is portrayed as the one who heals everything broken, who sets us free from every circumstance that binds us, and restores to life those who cast off- and that no one is beyond hope.

Let us hear God's Word as it comes to us today, through Mt chapter 9.

SERMON, "Twenty- twenty vision"

A woman rushes to see her doctor, looking very worried and strung out.

"Doctor," she says, "take a look at me. When I woke up this morning, I looked at myself in the mirror and saw my hair all wiry and frazzled up, my skin was all wrinkled and pasty, my eyes were bloodshot and bugging out, and I had this corpse-like look on my face! What's wrong with me, Doctor?"

The doctor looks her over for a couple of minutes, and says, "Well, I can tell you that there isn't anything wrong with your eyesight ..."

Many of us see quite clearly all our wrinkles, our warts, our ugliness, the things that are wrong with us, and often we see even MORE clearly the things that are wrong with OTHERS, but Jesus, the GREATphysician, would say that there's plenty wrong with our eyesight.

Jesus came to give us true 20/20 vision. To show us not only our wrinkles, warts, ugliness and wrongdoing, but also the heart of God.

So that when we look at ourselves and one another we may see beyond the limitations of this present moment, beyond the limitations of who we are and what we've done, and may have a glimpse of something more- a glimpse of divine possibility in ourselves and one another.

This ability to see beyond appearances, this 20/20 vision that Jesus brings, is the gift of FAITH. The religious leaders in the gospel of Matthew do not have 20/20 vision.

When they look at Matthew, they see a tax collector, a traitor who extorts money from his own people, a sinner, a man who has allied himself with the Roman enemy,

They see a man who handles unclean Roman coins stamped with the words, "Caesar is God", a man who has placed HIMSELF beyond the religious community, the community who worship one God and only one God.

Someone who deserves to be shunned. They see a "box", a category of misdemeanors, that can be cast aside.

Jesus, on the other hand, does NOT see a tax collector. In verse 9 we read, " Jesus was walking along and saw (Do you remember what he saw?)...he saw a man- a man.....sitting.....at a tax booth.

Do you hear the possibility? If he is merely sitting at a tax booth, he doesn't necessarily belong there - why he could be sitting somewhere else, he could be sitting at table with Jesus, sitting at Jesus feet- he is not in Jesus eyes DEFINED by where he sits now.

He is a man, a human being, and he can make other choices.....

We don't know really what kind of man Matthew was, or what led him down a road that ended as a Roman collaborator, and a social pariah. Whether it was greed, or desperation.....

Did he see the opportunity to get rich and not care who suffered? Was he in debt? Desperate? Thinking the social consequences couldn't be worse than his present circumstances?.

Or was he just one of those people who had always been on the fringe, the kid the others picked on, always an outsider, so that he had nothing to lose. And this was his chance to get even.....?

However Matthew got to be sitting at that table, what happens when Jesus passes by is truly extraordinary. Somehow, as Jesus sees Matthew and Matthew sees Jesus seeing him, Matthew is somehow set free to choose a new way!

The moment comes and Matthew seizes it. So often we don't recognize the moment when we need to decide. We think we have TIME.

I remember hearing about a firestorm in California where dozens of people died. The flames moved faster than people could flee. Police had begged people to leave their homes, but they weren't taken seriously. One survivor described people loading into their cars, TV's, computers, as though they were going on vacation....They never made it out of the fire.

There ARE moments when we HAVE to make instant choices- for LIFE. Not necessarily physical life, but in the sense that God intends when God says to the people of Israel "I set before you life and death, Choose Life, that you may live. "

This is the choice before Matthew in today's scripture- up till now he's made bad choices. We don't know how long he has endured the pain, the isolation, the regret. But on THIS day a door opens for him.

JESUS is walking by, and pauses at his table. A moment in time, when their eyes lock, when Jesus looks at Matthew with the eyes of God, and sees not a tax collector, but a future disciple.

A moment in time when Matthew's heart leaps with hope, a moment in which he makes his decision, and he stumbles to his feet and shuffles after Jesus. Likely not seeing where this decision will lead, but with every step feeling lighter, cleaner.

It's called faith – that opening of our eyes to new possibilities, to God's possibilities. And it's a gift.

God GIVES us faith, and then, when we've glimpsed that possibility, it's OUR decision whether to respond, whether we'll say, - yes, yes, I want to follow you Jesus, wherever you'll lead. .

Matthew surely didn't know when he left his tax table, that he would be writing a gospel, a gospel that for centuries would be the church's central gospel, a gospel in which he would share the truth, the grace that he had experienced that day- a gospel that teaches that in following Jesus we are set free.

We never know where a decision to follow Christ will lead us. We only know perhaps the pain in our heart today, the desire to start again, the open invitation, and the love that tells us that we CAN.

And so we stumble to our feet; we leave our metaphorical tax tables, we leave whatever empty place we've gotten stuck in, and we START on the journey with Jesus.

We put one foot in front of the other, strange though it may FEEL, because we've been SITTING for so long, and step by little step, prayer by prayer, small action after small action, we move away from our old choices ---into a new way that God shows us.

And it's never too late. We're never too stuck- The woman with a hemorrhage must have wondered all those long twelve years if God hadn't forgotten her, but God does NOT forget us.

No matter how frozen, paralysed, cut off from life, no matter how DEAD we may feel, no one is beyond God's compassion and love.

One of our greatest challenges in making change is our lack of vision, our lack of faith in the possibility of something more, our NOT seeing beyond the present circumstances, our BELIEF that NOTHING can change.

I grew up in South Africa, I truly believed that nothing could break the system of apartheid- from where I sat, it looked pretty hopeless.

And yet today in retrospect, I see how much hope there was in others and how they acted on that hope, I see how much faith there was in the possibility of hearts and minds changing, and I see that in fact they did, and I am appalled at my own lack of imagination, my blindness.

Today I look at the systems of greed and materialism that we are caught in- the unspeakable inequity between our lifestyle and that of the majority of the world, who do not even have fresh water let alone enough food to eat, and I feel that same sense of hopelessness- I cannot see how whole systems can change...

But my South African experience alerts me to my own blindness, and my Christian faith tells me to believe in a God of infinite possibility. A God who will open our eyes and will lead us into those new possibilities , if we will say, “yes” and be available.

We may feel overwhelmed with the larger picture of the world, but we CAN start with our own - lives. Do WE live out of God’s possibilities?

Do we know someone perhaps like Matthew the tax collector. someone from whom we’ve cut ourselves off, because they’ve betrayed us, hurt us? Because they’ve taken something from us that was not theirs to take- perhaps our dignity, our sense of worth, maybe material goods.

Maybe they’ve lied and robbed us of truth. Maybe in going after what they want. They’ve trampled on us.

Jesus says, we’re to learn what it means, I desire mercy, not sacrifice. In the first century, sacrifice was THE way of worshiping God. So in modern terms we might say that God desires mercy not worship.

It’s a good thing to come and worship God, but something should change as a result of our worship. We come here so that God can do business with us. We come to open ourselves to the Spirit of God, for God to work changes in us, for God’s mercy and grace to flow through us to others.

Our worship should make us more merciful, open our hearts wider to others. this begins with our eyes being opened wider. The first step in becoming more merciful is to see more clearly.

To see others not as wrong doers but each as a precious child of God, a human being in the making, someone with whom God is not yet finished.

We say clearly in our Runnymede Mission statement that our purpose in gathering as a church IS so that – “Christ’s healing grace may REACH a hurting world”- and we understand that we are God’s vessels of grace and mercy.

Jesus calls each of us to follow him.- If we say “yes”, and are willing to leave behind, our own little tables with our own pile of stuff, with our own pile of rules and judgments and priorities,

Jesus will lead us to place at another table- a table that is so long and so wide that it stretches across the whole world, into the past, into the future and to all infinity.

And there at that table, our eyes will finally be opened to see the truth clearly: the truth that it is by grace alone that ANY of us sit there at all, grace extended by the God of all the universe, who made every one of us, loves us all equally, and won’t let a single one of us go.

To God be all the praise, the honour, the glory. Amen