

Sermon Text: Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Now I am indebted to my Wesley Commons group I call “Wisdom of the Ages” for the direction of this short message today. Together, they helped me discern a truth that I really had not seen in this particular gospel reading, and I’d like to share that truth with you. In these few, short verses there are three, rapid-fire examples of lost causes. Lost causes Jesus redeems. The big point seems to be that Jesus ignores the hopelessness of criminals, of the dirty, of the sick, even the dead. Jesus ignores the fact that polite society ignores these untouchables, and he touches them, and he heals them, and he eats with them, and he treats them as people instead of riffraff and outcasts and trash. He is a physician for those who wear their symptoms of spiritual illness out in public, too tired of fighting to hide their need. They come to Jesus. They cry out for help. They hope against hope for mercy, and they find mercy and healing in Jesus’ touch, and for daring to touch these lost causes, to heal the hopeless, Jesus is roundly criticized by the fine, upstanding, religious people of the day. They ask, “What does our God have to do with riffraff like that? What does our God, the God of the clean and of the pure, have to do with people like that?” That is the theme and the challenge for us.

The second point, not to be missed, is this. If Jesus came for the criminals and for the dirty sinners and for the sick and even for those given up as dead, then what about us? What about the happy? What about the healthy? What about the wealthy? What about the clean? What about the pure? What about us good people? What about us? Doesn’t Jesus have even more for those of us who are more worthy than the lost causes all around?

I say with tongue firmly in cheek, two college students were talking about their faith one day, and the Roman Catholic student asked the Methodist if Methodists had confessionals. The Methodist said, “What?” The Catholic said, “You know, the little room where you go in and confess your sins.” The Methodist said, “Ahhh, we don’t have those, no.” The Roman Catholic asked, “You don’t? Well, what do Methodists do about your sins?” The Methodist student said, “Well, I guess we just don’t talk about it, or maybe we just don’t sin as much as y’all do.” I think mostly we just don’t talk about it. We don’t talk about sin unless it’s someone else’s sin, now that’s a topic we can sink our teeth into.

The upstanding, good people in this scripture are not the object of Jesus’ grace and positive attention. He tells them to go and learn what it means that God desires mercy and not sacrifice. I started thinking about that. You see, a wealthy person back then, and now, could easily afford to sacrifice from his herd or his wealth, and have plenty, plenty left over. He could spare a huge sacrifice and get public applause from the priest and from the synagogue board of stewards, and everyone would say, “How generous! Isn’t God lucky to have you as one of his followers!” Sacrifices cost a wealthy man very little. Involve only a transaction of wealth to the church. That’s not a bad thing. The church will need some wealth from now on and forever to operate. A sacrifice requires no people contact, no people contact whatsoever. Jesus was saying, “God wants mercy.” It occurs to me that mercy can only, only, be given person to person. Do you see that? Mercy. Mercy, which

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Jesus taught, which Jesus showed in his behavior, mercy which Jesus desires more than sacrifice. Mercy can only be shown person to person. Lost causes.

There is a fourth lost cause here. One who is not redeemed in this story. Those who think they are good and whole and not sin sick or selfish and in need of nothing from God. People who talk about prayer, but never pray. People who say tithing is right, but never tithes. People who belong to church, but never attend. People who say the Bible is God’s word, but do not read it. People who criticize others for doing the things that they themselves do. People who stay away from church for trivial reasons, and sing “Oh, How I Love Jesus.” People who continue in selfish sin all their lives, but expect a Heavenly reward.

Now, the first obvious lost cause was Matthew. He had been the high bidder. You may not know the history, but he must have been the high bidder. He bought the right to extort taxes and then some from his own people, from his own neighbors, for the occupying Roman military government. He bought the right to do that. He was a traitor. He was unclean. He was untouchable. He was sold out for mere money. Matthew was sick. The obvious sin sick greed had overtaken him. He sold himself and his neighbors for money. He sold out his self-respect. Not even the Romans cared for these sellouts. As a group, tax collectors were considered so corrupt that history records that even the corrupt emperor, Nero, thought about, considered doing away with them. Even he found tax collectors distasteful. Jesus called the likes of Matthew, the tax collector, who bought the right to betray his fellow citizens, he called him to be a disciple. Jewish law at the time considered, and I will say this as delicately as I can, considered a woman during her monthly cycle to be unclean, untouchable, and along came this woman who had bleeding in that way for 12 years. Talk about ritually unclean, untouchable! She was separated by ritual law from friends and family. She could not even attend synagogue or participate in religious rituals. Imagine how lonely she must have felt, how unclean she must have been made to feel. She touched Jesus with faith. She touched him, and Jesus did not recoil with horror. He was not angry that she did not know her place. Jesus did not rush to a ritual bath to cleanse himself. Jesus simply looked at her and said, “Daughter, your faith has made you well.” Then the lost cause of the dead little girl, the funeral ritual had already begun. There was music, and there was wailing and friends gathered round. She, too, was ritually untouchable, and Jesus took her hand, and she got up. Are you down? Do you feel outcast? Have you sins that stand between you and God, that stand between you and others around you? Then come, come and see and taste and touch and know that the Lord is merciful. He has invited you to his table, a table of his grace, and he will remove our sins from us as far as the East is from the West. Are you among those who think the church is only for good people, clean people, nice people, people like us? God can forgive you for that conceit as well. No one is beyond the help or hope of God in Christ. God’s grace is for you, too. God’s healing is for you, too. God’s forgiveness is for you and me and for all of us. God’s sacrifice, Jesus’ blood, Jesus’ pain, Jesus’ death, was for you, too. A sacrifice sufficient not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world, says scripture, and I say amen and amen.