

Sunday, June 11, 2023
Second Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

Matthew 9.9-13, 18-26

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/2544569335708526>

(Sermon begins at about 0:10)

“All Are Welcome, Even You and Me”

Congratulations! We survived! We made it through the most rigorous period in the church calendar—starting with Holy Week and Easter, followed by the seven-week season of Easter, culminating with Pentecost, and then Trinity Sunday. Having come through all that, we now can breathe a sigh of relief as we move into what is commonly referred to as “Ordinary Time.” The six-month period that runs from Pentecost through the end of our liturgical year.

When we hear the word “ordinary,” we often think of such synonyms as common, usual, routine, regular, predictable. Maybe even mundane, boring, dull. But fear not. Strictly speaking, Ordinary Time is not named as such because of any sense of being routine or dull. In actuality, we use the term “ordinary” in the mathematical sense. Ordinary, from the term “ordinal,” referring to the ordering of something. As in first, second, third, etc. In this case, referring to the numbering of Sundays. In the Episcopal reckoning of the church year, we refer to this period as the “season after Pentecost,” but do number the Sundays. Trinity Sunday was the first Sunday after Pentecost. Today is the second Sunday after Pentecost. And so on to November 26th, which will be the 26th, or Last, Sunday after Pentecost.

With that being the official explanation of why we call this Ordinary Time, I do think there is something to be said for this period of the church year being considered “ordinary” in the other sense of the word. As in usual or routine. In the first half of the church year, we focus on major events in the life of Jesus and what those events mean in our lives of faith. The first part of the church year is filled with a series of significant and extraordinary events. We start with Advent and basically go nonstop through Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost, with each season being filled with action and drama. After all that, we might be ready a little ordinary time.

So, now we settle in to a time that is a little more normal, a little more routine, in our own lives and in the focus for the remainder of the church year. During this period, our Gospel lessons focus on Jesus’ earthly ministry of teaching, healing, and care for those in need or who are marginalized. We look at Jesus’ day-to-day life and learn lessons about how we are to live our own day-to-day lives. This period of Ordinary Time is quite appropriate and essential to our lives of faith because it is in the midst of our ordinary lives that we are called to live out our faith. It’s not just about celebrating the major events of Christmas and Epiphany, Lent and Holy Week, Easter and Pentecost. Living our faith is something we are called to do 365 days of the year. And the lessons we focus on during this period of Ordinary Time provide the foundation for how we live our lives of faith on a day-to-day basis. And how the institutional church is to operate on a day-to-day basis.

Today's Gospel lesson provides us with a fundamental insight into how God operates and what that means for us. Insight that forms the foundation for our lives of faith, individually and as the Church. Admittedly, there is a lot going on, with multiple characters, engaged in varied activities, across multiple venues. Yet all pointing to a common theme, to one central truth.

We start off with Jesus calling Matthew, a tax collector, to follow him. What we need to know is that tax collectors were absolutely despised and viewed as being among the worst of sinners. As we all know, paying taxes is a necessary civic responsibility to fund government and the services it provides the people. But here, the government being funded was the Roman Empire. As such, tax collectors were viewed as traitors, as collaborators with the enemy, since they were collecting taxes from fellow Jews to support the Empire that occupied their homeland and oppressed their people. Tax collectors were also considered corrupt because of the way they got paid for their work. They did not receive a salary, but rather collected from individuals the taxes lawfully owed to the government PLUS a commission. Tax collectors were notorious for lining their own pockets by extorting more than required by the Empire. So, they were, understandably despised by their fellow citizens and considered among the worst of sinners.

This is who Jesus wants to hang out with. He goes to Matthew's house and shares dinner with him, his tax collector friends, and other various and sundry sinners. Which raises eyebrows among the local religious authorities: "Why does [he] eat with tax collectors and sinners?" To which Jesus famously responds, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick . . . For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." In other words, as far as Jesus is concerned—as far as God is concerned—all are welcome at his table. Even tax collectors and sinners. Especially tax collectors and sinners.

Oh, and one thing that kind of gets lost in this Gospel lesson is that when Jesus says to Matthew, "Follow me," he isn't just saying he wants to have dinner with him. Jesus is inviting him to become one of his disciples, one of the Twelve, one of his inner circle. One of those who, after Jesus' death, would become the leaders of the early Church. This is a very clear statement of Jesus' perspective on the radical inclusivity of God's love. Of Jesus' perspective on the radical inclusivity of what would become the Body of Christ. That all are welcome, no matter who they are. Even those considered to be the worst of sinners. And not just welcomed to attend a worship service or a potluck. Even welcomed into positions of leadership. A clear sign that Jesus knows our past, but calls us to a new future where that past does not define us.

Jesus' welcoming of those who are marginalized, even excluded, continues with his encounter with a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. One who, because of her gender, is already considered of lesser status by society. Not only that, she obviously had a medical issue involving the unusual discharge of blood. Regular menstrual cycles were considered to render women ritually unclean for a certain part of the month. In this case, the implication is an ongoing issue that had rendered the woman, for all intents and purposes, permanently unclean and not eligible to participate in the life of the worshiping community. Not only is she suffering physically, she is also cut off from her community of faith, from her support system. And to make matters even worse, she reaches out and touches Jesus. An act that will render him ritually unclean, as well. A major taboo. And yet, Jesus does not get upset

or angry for her transgression. Instead, he praises her for her bold act of faith: “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.’ And instantly the woman was made well.” Jesus has welcomed her when no one else would. And in so doing, she is healed. Physically and spiritually. She is restored to her community, able to resume her life.

And similarly with the returning to life the daughter of the leader of the synagogue. Here again, Jesus daring to touch a dead body being considered an act that would have, in the eyes of the religious authorities, rendered him ritually unclean. And yet, that did not matter. Here was one in need of healing. And Jesus would willingly embrace her, to bring that about. To restore her to life, to health, to her family.

All of these acts on Jesus’ part being a tearing down of barriers. All these being acts of inclusivity and of welcome. All these being tangible demonstrations of God’s expansive and all-inclusive love. And frankly, from God’s perspective, from Jesus’ perspective, there is nothing outstanding or special about what is being done. This is all quite ordinary.

These acts of love and inclusion certainly point to who God is, to who Jesus Christ is. And while ordinary for God and Jesus, maybe not always so ordinary for us. Which is why they are presented as a model for what the Church, as the Body of Christ, is meant to be. And by extension, of who we are meant to be as members of the Body of Christ. As those who ourselves, regardless of who we are, regardless of how sinful we may be, have been welcomed and included. Recognizing that we are those who have been embraced and healed by God and by Christ. A model of how we are to ourselves welcome others.

Over the last 2,000 years, the Church has struggled with how to embrace the radical hospitality, the radical inclusivity, Jesus demonstrates in today’s Gospel. It has not always been easy, bumping up against social norms and prevailing secular attitudes. We have not always lived into the fullness of who Jesus calls us to be as his Body in the world. And while we have made great strides, particularly in The Episcopal Church, we can always use reminders like today’s Gospel of who we are and what we are about. We can use reminders to continually to be on the lookout for those barriers—sometimes subtle, sometimes not-so-subtle—that may stand in the way of all being welcomed into our midst.

In our own time, it may not be tax collectors and other sinners. It may not be people with chronic illness or infirmity. But there are always the threats of barriers being erected to the inclusivity Jesus calls us to. As we know, June is Pride month, when we celebrate our LGBTQ+ siblings. But even as we in The Episcopal Church, as we at St. Gregory’s do welcome and include those of the LGBTQ community without question and without reservation, we are painfully aware that this is not universal. Not in our society and certainly not in the Church. Sadly, there are a number of government entities and religious organizations that are increasingly threatening and seeking to repress those who do not conform to narrow definitions and understandings of personhood, of what is viewed as “normal” and acceptable. That seek to deny the acknowledgment and honoring of who people know themselves to be. Of not being able to openly express who they are. In some cases, not even being allowed to receive the support and care they need to live into the fullness of who God created them to be.

Thankfully, this is not the case in our state, in our denomination, or in our parish. But as history continually reminds us, we cannot become complacent. We must always be vigilant. We must always be on the lookout and be aware of those ways in which some, intentionally or unintentionally, subtly or not-so-subtly, are excluded. We must be intentional that all are welcomed and included, regardless of who they are, of who God created them to be. Regardless of race or ethnicity, sex or gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, illness or infirmity, social status, political perspective, you name it. Any characteristic that some might look to as being a cause for treating as lesser or as other. Because, as Jesus clearly demonstrates in today's Gospel, all are welcome, regardless of who they are. Even you and me.