

“Oh Yes He Is” – Mt 9:9-13, 18-26 – June 5, 2005

As you saw from me handing out the certificates, today is “Graduation Day” for twelve people who have diligently worked through the “Bible Basics” class. We had a lot of fun, including the wrap-up BBQ this past Wednesday, and I think that we made some interesting discoveries about scripture along the way. I’m sure all in the class will remember me saying (many times!) that it is the little unexpected glitch in a scripture text – that little word or phrase that is kind of ‘out of place’, that acts like a hook or a sliver and snags your attention – it is that little glitch that is vitally important. When I read our text for today in Matthew’s gospel I was intrigued by the tiny little detail toward the end of this poignant story, “And they laughed at him.” That mocking derision of Jesus sets the tone for the stunning climax that will immediately follow, and is so the opposite of how the crowd will soon feel. It’s a fascinating moment – let’s see how it all developed.

The first part of our reading is the familiar story of Jesus calling Matthew to come along with him, to become a disciple. “Follow me”, Jesus issued the briefest of commands, and Matthew did – got up and followed him. Now, that’s the first jolt in this story, although the impact is probably lost on us. You see, Matthew was sitting at the tax booth. Now, tax people are not the most popular even today, but in those days the situation was even more extreme. In those days tax collectors were considered to be unsavory and unclean, in the same boat as the worst of sinners. They implemented a system open to much patronage, graft and corruption, and both they and the system were not very popular. Needless to say, those who actually collected the money were considered to be not only crooks and thieves but even collaborators with the Roman occupiers. They most certainly would not be welcome in the best of synagogue or temple circles, and neither would anyone who associated with them.

And so here is Jesus, not only not staying well clear of the tax collector’s booth, but bold as brass walks up and commands, “follow me”, and to everyone’s surprise the tax collector does. Follow him, that is.

Now it’s not bad enough that Jesus talks with this tax collector and even invites him to come along, but Jesus even has the astounding nerve to accept an invitation to his house for supper. This upset some very religious people, and from the way those who accused Jesus of unreligious behaviour put their question it sounds like it happened a lot – eating with sinners, that is. Jesus was no doubt even ‘guilty’ of putting back a glass or two of decent wine with them as well, surrounded by friends of the host, by tax collectors, and by other people who had also been banned from the synagogue, labeled as ‘sinners’ and banned from contact with the righteous, in case their sinning-ness was contagious. I’m willing to bet that these meals were memorable events, about as far from an afternoon tea in a Victorian manse as you can get! Noise, commotion, questions, answers, the clink of dishes and plates and cups, and above all much laughter. All of the ingredients of people enjoying each other, growing in friendship, growing in knowledge and experience, sharing their triumphs and failures, explaining their hopes and dreams, exploring this radical new vision and revelation of God brought into their lives by this strange and powerful man who joined them at the table.

Maybe it was the laughter, the obvious signs of people having fun, that prompted the Pharisees to question his disciples about it. “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”, they query, and we can tell from Jesus’ answer that their

question was neither friendly nor wanting to grow. It was clearly a confrontational question, loaded with all of the implication that “if you don’t have a good answer, we’ll brand you a sinner too and never let you darken the door of our synagogue!”

Jesus, never one to shy away from a confrontation, especially with the righteous and self-righteous, responds with a wonderful two-part challenge. The first is the well-known maxim re physicians working with the sick, not the healthy. An innocent enough response to their question, and a maxim too obvious to argue. But it’s the second part of Jesus’ answer that is a stunning counter-challenge to the Pharisees. To those masters of the ‘proof text’, Jesus turns the scripture back on them. “Go and learn”, he chides them, “go back to the beginning and learn from one of your favourite scripture verses that your understanding of God is wrong” Jesus tells them directly with his answer. The popular image of Jesus as meek and mild fits when he’s dealing with the weak, the lame, the sick, the unloved, as we’ll see in a minute; but that gentle, meek and mild image certainly doesn’t fit when he was challenging those who would put limits and restrictions on God’s love, mercy and reconciliation. With a simple response he slashes the Pharisee’s righteous balloon, deflating their grand sense of self.

Can’t you just imagine the reaction of the Pharisees? “Well, I never!” “The nerve!” “Who does he think he is, God almighty, to talk to us like that?!” “There’s not a drop of righteousness in him – he can’t be the prophet everyone says he is!”

And in a wonderful display of irony, the answer, “Oh yes he is!”, comes soon enough, in the form of an impassioned plea from a leader of the synagogue. “My daughter has just died, merely come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.”, the distraught but believing man begs, kneeling before Jesus in submission, and displaying the most practical kind of theology and prayer, pure desperate faith pouring out a heart-wrenching request. And Jesus’ response was so typical of him: rising to help, every bit as quickly as he rose to answer the challenge of the Pharisees. On the way to the house where the daughter lay, in a story-within-a-story, another desperate soul reaches out to Jesus. A woman, suffering from bleeding, believes that even if she can only touch the hem of his cloak, she will be healed, and with his familiar “take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well” Jesus cures her. So quick, so powerful, almost an aside, and yet setting an undeniable preview for His answer to the Pharisees.

However, arriving at the house, it is apparent that the rescue team is too late. The final arrangements have been made, the people from the funeral home are already there, the flute players are playing, the crowd is wailing along with the professional grievers. “Go away”, Jesus commands the crowd, “the girl is not dead, only sleeping”. And they laughed at him. They laughed at him. I guess so. It was plain to see that the girl was dead. Who did this intruder with the wild claim think he was, God almighty? He couldn’t be, he wasn’t even clean enough to be acceptable to the Pharisees.

God almighty? The Pharisees got their answer. Oh yes, He is. This strange, enigmatic man answered not only the challenge of the Pharisees but the mocking laughter of the crowd with a simple but all-powerful demonstration. He took the girl by the hand, and she got up. So simple, so effective, such a clear answer. One healing with a word, one healing with a touch. No one was laughing now.

You need to understand just what a slap in the face both of these healings were to the Pharisees, just how completely these healings provided the “Oh yes he is!” answer. You see, both of these incidents, the woman who touched his cloak and the dead girl,

went way beyond mere eating and drinking with sinners to put Jesus at risk. The moment that Jesus' cloak was touched by the woman he was, according to Pharisaic law, totally unclean, and needed to undergo cleansing rituals before he could even contemplate worshipping God. The woman, who had had her medical problem for twelve years, had for those twelve years been banned from entering any synagogue, or the temple, or even associating with family, friends, or anyone else who wished to be considered righteous. Her act of faith, touching his cloak, condemned him to a vigorous cleansing ritual. So it was in this 'unclean' state that Jesus not only entered the house of a person who had died, but dared to touch the body. The Pharisees would have been shrieking, "unclean, unclean!", just like for a leper. They would have been shrieking and protesting, except for being speechless at the obvious power of God at work in him, that he could and did raise the girl from death by taking her hand. And the crowd? Well, I'm sure that they no longer were laughing at him. Silent, awe-struck wonder, more likely. Tears of joy, probably. Breathless hushed discussion of what had just happened. Possibly even a few mumbles of frustration from the professional mourners that now they might not get paid.

But the laughing was over. The mocking laughter, at least. The question, "could he be the Son of God?", answered with a clearly demonstrated, "Oh yes, He is!" Conquering both sickness and death with effortless ease, Jesus demonstrated clearly that the power of God was truly in him. The Pharisees must have been terribly confused, for by their reckoning nobody who was unclean could do such things. And since he had done these things, he must not have been unclean. Could they be wrong? Unthinkable! They would indeed have to "go and learn" anew. Maybe even go back and learn what he meant with his reference to Hosea, learn from their scripture God desires instead of distancing ourselves from those who need us, we are to draw near in love and acceptance.

So, who's laughing now? We are. What reaction other than unbounded excitement and joy and laughter is possible to this powerful demonstration of the power of God at work in Jesus? If we are touched at all by Jesus' dramatic and powerful answer to the stuffy exclusionism of the Pharisees our reaction has to be one of laughter and joy, as we begin to understand that we too, sinners all, have also been called by him; we too have been made whole by our faith, as imperfect and incomplete as it may be. We also have been redeemed by his blood and offered by Him a welcoming and helping hand into the kingdom of God. Who's laughing now? All of us sinners, restored, redeemed, uplifted, and accepted by the one in whom we place our trust and our faith, Jesus the Christ, the Son of God.

With that joy and laughter, however, comes a responsibility. The command to Matthew, "follow me", echoes across the years to us as well. We are charged with the responsibility to follow Jesus, proclaiming his healing and saving action in us. Not through Pharisaic withdrawal, shying away from real life, fearful that the power of Christ is insufficient to preserve us, but with an open, joyful and laughing display of abundant life and love of God, rejoicing in and celebrating the 'hesed' mercy of God, a covenant of love, righteousness and loyalty sealed in his Son, Jesus Christ. It is our calling, it is our joy, it is our pleasure to spread the report of Jesus' healing and power throughout the district, calling to all who will listen, "Is Jesus the Son of God? – Oh yes, He is!"