

We are known by the company we keep

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert B. Edson, Rector, in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on June 8, 2008, the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost.

For I have come to call not the righteous but the sinners.

Matthew 9:13

It is said that you can tell a good deal about a person by the company he keeps. When Jesus called together his disciples, he chose outcasts rather than insiders, marginal people rather than respected members of society. As he went about calling together his disciples, it was in the tax collector's office that he found a man named Matthew. In those days, it was generally known that tax collectors were notorious for keeping a portion of what they collected for themselves. What they didn't keep went to pay the foreign officials who occupied their land as well as for the Roman soldiers who enforced the occupation. What really offended the Jews was having their tax money used for building temples to the gods of the foreigners, including a shrine to the emperor.

When Jesus approaches Matthew, he doesn't lecture him on his dishonesty or lack of principles for being an extortionist. Matthew most likely knows what he is doing is wrong and may have decided to turn his life around and is looking for the opportunity leave it all behind.

The Pharisees, who are the measure of moral uprightness for their time, are scandalized that a rabbi would mix with someone with a known reputation as Matthew. Sharing a meal with someone is an intimate thing and when Jesus eats with sinners it is not only scandalous, it is believed to be downright blasphemous. Jesus' sense of mercy and compassion is lost on them. They don't understand that even the worst sinner can be redeemed.

Matthew shows no hesitancy in responding to Jesus' call to follow him. He gets up and leaves his tax tables and accounts to follow Jesus. His response to follow Jesus will forever change his life. He finds himself in good company. The disciples are sinners like everyone else. The difference is that they know who they are and what God wants them to be. They are the kind of people Jesus wants with him on his mission. Jesus has not come to condemn but bring God's mercy to people.

Those who are not aware of their sin feel no need for healing and those who have no need for spiritual conversion are wasting their time with Jesus. He has come to save those who know they need to be healed and those who think they have no need of healing are on their own. He has come to bring reconciliation to those alienated from God. Those who think they are favored by God just don't get it.

Our first task as followers of Christ is to admit our own need of healing from within. When we are open to God's redeeming love we find ourselves in the company of all sorts and conditions of people. The change begins when our attention, our time and our energy are focused on those for whom no one else cares: the neglected and abused, the failures, the nobodies, and the outcasts. God's unconditional love for us includes those whom we find it difficult to love.

The tradition of mercy is the theme of the prophet Hosea who urges understanding and mercy over sacrifice. Mercy in the Hebrew is *hesed*, which means steadfast, loving kindness, righteousness and loyalty. Of such is the covenant that God has with us. When it comes to healing people on the Sabbath or keeping company with notorious sinners, Jesus always acts out of mercy. Sacrifice can be a strain, mercy never is. Pity can be patronizing, mercy never is. Charity can be contrived, but mercy never is. When Jesus reaches out to those who are excluded and ignored it is not out of pity or charity or sacrifice, only out of mercy. As Christ transforms the person and life

of Matthew the tax collector, so he converts and transforms our lives to reflect God's grace in how we understand and relate to others.

We know that it is superficial to choose friends for appearances or for what they can do for us. Befriending an introverted and self effacing person can be both challenging and rewarding. Getting to know a diffident person often has an element of surprise and delight in getting through to the inner person few people ever get to know. Jesus has a way of getting through to those who need him most. Just as a doctor uses his time, energy and gifts in healing the seriously ill, Jesus heals those whose souls need mending more than those who ignore their need for inner healing.

Someone who was applying for the ordination process was once asked, "Why are you abandoning the laity?" I have since often thought about the answer to that tough question for myself. I never felt that I abandoned the laity but have always seen myself working along side of everyone in our shared ministry. My vocation as a priest has been tested many times over. I have never regretted it. The most important promises and vows I have made have been as a Christian, a priest, a husband and a father. To keep such promises and vows for a lifetime requires discipline and faithfulness.

For all of us the call to minister comes when we least expect it and often when it is least convenient for us. God has a way of calling us to serve others when we think we have more important things to do. That is God's way of teaching us to focus on the needs of others and to have a perspective about who we are and what is really important.

Helen Keller, who was both deaf and blind, once said that science may have found a cure for most evils, but no remedy has yet been found for the evil of apathy. A placard I carried on a picket line in the 1960's read, "Apathy Kills!" I kept it for a long time as it could be used for most any worthy cause.

Remember, you may only be one person and you can't do everything, but you can do something. Alone, you may not make much difference but working with others you can begin to change peoples' lives, one person at a time. Jesus did. We are called to be his disciples for reasons sometimes only God knows. We may not always understand, but we must never refuse the call. That is both our calling and our joy.